

MASTERMIND HUNTING

was: The Hunt (for a Missing Child)

by Louis IX

Summary: Dumbledore and his associates never checked on Harry during his childhood. They should have. Now, the Dursleys are missing, and Harry can't be found either. If he can't be found, how could he enter Hogwarts? Does he even know about his legacy? And what are those muggles doing in the picture? Some prophecies are underway, too, and praise the gods that their outcome won't be lethal.

Main genre: Action/Adventure – but there will also be run-ins with real-world modern History, pinches of Humour, morsels of Science, hints of Romance, Spiritual concepts, Political issues, a few Tragedies, and my usual bits of bad Poetry. Know that most locations, events, sciences and technologies were researched and are sticking to the reality of that time

Rating: T

Disclaimer: I don't own anything you might recognize: the Harry Potter universe belongs to its owners, and this story is written only for enjoyment; as such, I may own the plot and some non-canon characters and locations, but that's all – and I certainly get no money from it.

Possible spoilers for all the Harry Potter canon books. Some facts and characters are taken from them, even if they appear later in the books. Also remember that this is a fanfiction, a subdomain of fiction. Finally, note that this story will cover all of Harry Potter's life, and therefore, it is quite large, but there will be no prequel and no sequel – although companion stories could pop up later.

Feel free to express yourself. If you like or dislike anything, you can use the reviews to point it out to me. If you do so on another website, please leave a review with its address. Thank you for your input.

PART 1 – The Early Years

This part comprises chapters 1 to 9 and covers Harry growing up and discovering his powers.

Chapter 1 – Adoption and Prophecies

posted June 8th, 2005

When Vernon Dursley met Petunia Evans, that night of October 1978, he was one of the most down-to-earth people on earth. His father Ernest had worked all his life for a company making brooms, and his mother had been a good housewife. He had just been recruited as undersecretary of the exportation manager of Grunnings, a large company making and selling drills. Vernon and Petunia hit quite easily and started to speak about each other, and he quickly noticed that Petunia was hiding something. More specifically, she was hiding something about her sister. He knew she had a sister because he had seen the pictures on the walls of his in-laws. It wasn't that she was dead, because he had seen her there too, once. From all he knew, Lily Evans was quite beautiful and quick-witted, as much as her boyfriend James. It sometimes unnerved him that he could be outsmarted by people, but he had made his life a long time ago, and his philosophy turned around the money you made. He was employed in a large company with a potential career there, so what others thought or said didn't bother him at all.

On one evening, when he had asked Petunia for the umpteenth time what she was hiding about her family, she cracked and told him everything. His first reaction was, of course, a denial. He had been raised strictly, perhaps too strictly, and wizardry wasn't a concept he could integrate easily. She couldn't even demonstrate anything, as only Lily had the talent. However, from his knowledge of her and of basic human feelings, he understood she was jealous.

Petunia was jealous that her sister was a witch and not her.

On a rainy day of May 1980, Vernon Dursley received a phone call from the hospital where his wife was expecting to give birth to their first son. He had always wanted to have two sons and a daughter, like his father before him, and like his grandfather prior than that. He would place his first son in the best schools and the second would be in the army. His daughter would be raised to be a good housewife. Petunia had agreed. Everything was planned perfectly.

However, as Murphy's Law states, everything that can go wrong, will go wrong.

He hung up the phone, white as a sheet, before going to Mr Lakeson, his boss, stuttering his case. As he had been hard-working, Mr Lakeson allowed him a week of sick leave.

Mr Lakeson had joined the ceremony too, his wife hanging at his arm, both clad in the customary black. Petunia wasn't even able to join, stranded in the hospital after the mess the drunken surgeon had made. She wouldn't be able to give birth ever again. Vernon had been in a right state, unable to discuss coherently with his boss, and his sick leave had been extended indefinitely.

It was only a month afterwards that the man was able to hide his grief enough to work efficiently again. His in-laws had relocated in his house in Surrey to take care of Petunia, and they got several visits of Lily and James Potter. Those visits always brought tears to Petunia, though, because of Lily's obviously swollen belly. On one of these visits, though, James made a remark about magical ways of healing, and she started to hope again. Sadly, having seen her distress when the topic of pregnancy and babies was raised, the Potters never came back. The Evans didn't know that they had to hide from a mad Dark Lord. They also didn't know anyone else related to the magical world, and Petunia fell into sorrow again.

Sixteen months later...

Albus Dumbledore was one of the most powerful wizards to have lived on earth. And, thanks to extenuating circumstances, he was now the most powerful wizard alive. Harry Potter just took away the Dark Lord Voldemort and entered the History Book of Hyphenated Names as the Boy-Who-Lived. While the wizarding world was still unsure of the good news, and while Death Eaters were either arranging their affairs or rampaging in blind revenge, the most powerful wizard alive used a magical item looking like a lighter to extinguish the lights of Privet Drive, Surrey.

His friend and former student Rubeus Hagrid arrived a bit later on a flying motorcycle, and silently gave him a squirming package.

Nodding the overly large man away, Dumbledore went to number 4, sifting in his mind the reasons for leaving Harry Potter there.

He knocked at the door.

The door opened, and the young couple smiled happily, before letting the man in their house. The men went in the living room while the housewife went to fetch the pot of strong coffee she had prepared.

“So, Mr Vernon Dursley, and Mrs Petunia Dursley.” the man said, when said Petunia came back with the fuming pot and three cups.

When they nodded, the man continued, rifling through a stack of papers. “I’m Roger Preston, from the Adoption Services. You already have full custody of your orphaned nephew, Harry James Potter, and you asked to adopt him legally, so that he may bear your family name. In regard of the law, said nephew, being less than 2 years old, can be given your name without anything else than a signature in these forms. However...”

He looked at them and, noticing their sudden questioning distress, amended himself immediately. “Don’t worry! I just wanted to know your reasons for it.”

They found their smiles again, and looked at each other. Vernon had lost a great deal of weight during his month of mourning, but found, to his surprise, that it gave him a better health in general, something Petunia now agreed with. Vernon put his hand on Petunia’s swollen belly, and, while looking at her, spoke to the man.

“We want our little baby to consider him as a brother.”

The man nodded, unaware of the family’s history. Petunia, during the visit of the funny-looking old man six months before, had asked for a service in exchange for keeping the boy, and the subsequent visit to the magical hospital named St Mongoose – or something else, she had never remembered those funny names anyways – had brought her uterus and ovaries back in functional order. With Vernon’s willing help, she had then made everything to get herself pregnant – that’s when she had noticed and agreed with the more athletic body of her husband. After the positive pregnancy test, they had slowed down

that particular activity, and taken more time to play with the little boy left in their care. If nothing else, they had thought, it would teach them to be proper parents for their own kids. When the old man had told them the story while giving them the squirming package containing Harry Potter, they had initially thought that the wizarding world would take him back after a year or two, but the old man with a funny name – Dumbanddoor? Dummydoor? Doubledose? – had told them that at least ten years would pass before they would establish contact again.

Surprisingly, for them, the little boy had been adorable, and, not having their own, they fell for him quite easily. They knew that he was magical, and the old man had explained that sometimes, strange happenstances would occur. He had explained and given them a booklet about accidental magic. However, despite the levitating toys, transfigured food, or change of cloth colour, they reported on the boy the love they hadn't been able to give to their firstborn. That's why, a mere semester after receiving the squirming bundle, they had asked the Adoption Services for the permission to give their name to the child.

And Harry James Dursley came into existence.
Four months later...

The drunkard had been expelled from the hospital and sentenced to prison, and said hospital had paid for the damages, but Vernon was still scarred by what had happened the first time around. That's why he had asked for a full month of leave around the expected birth day. And it was a good thing, too, because their little son decided to show himself in advance. Dudley had been a name suggested by Vernon's sister Marge and he had blindly followed her advice the first time. Now Petunia decided to be in charge and named him James Ernest. The first was in honour of the dead biological father of Harry, and the second was Vernon's own father, of course – if the upcoming child had been a daughter, she would have had Lily in her name somewhere. Playing with Harry, and discovering the wonders he could do with magic, she finally understood her parents' reaction to Lily, and brought a closure on her jealousy.
Three years passed peacefully...

The man arrived home, and greeted his wife loudly.

“Darling, I’m home!”

“Shhhh!” Petunia interrupted him from the landing upstairs, before gesturing him to come discreetly.

Once there, he noticed the byplay in the kids’ room, and could only look with wide eyes, his mouth agape. Their 5-year old son was sporting a look of intense concentration while his young brother looked in awe at the farandole of baby toys turning in the air around their twin baby sisters. Said sisters, 18 months old, were laughing heartily like babies do. Only then did James notice the watching parents, and he nudged Harry warningly. His concentration broken, the older boy let the fluffy toys fall haphazardly, but young Eva and Maureen laughed even more.

“Sorry, mummy.” mumbled Harry.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about, Harry.” she said, entering the room and taking the twins for their bath.

“Yes, son.” Vernon added. “Just remember that you can’t do that outside, where others can see you. Alright?”

“Okay, daddy.”

The Dursleys left it at that. Their son Harry had a talent for magic, real magic, and they supposed that the old man knew about it, as he seemed to know everything.

However, nobody told them that kids weren’t usually able to do anything else than accidental magic. Harry Dursley hadn’t been controlling those dozen toys by accident.

And it was the beginning of a legend.
Two years later...

“Mum! Muuuuum!” the twins’ voice was strident.

“What is it?”

“I can’t find my fluffy bear!”

“Neither can I, mum!”

“Now, now. Eva, Maureen, what did I tell you? We are moving, and your toys have been packed in the suitcase. You can’t have them now; you’ll wait when we’ll arrive.”

“When, mum?”

“Yes, mum, when?”

Petunia sighed. If her 3-year-old twin daughters wanted a specific toy, there was a chance that they wouldn’t calm before obtaining it. The perspective of spending a 12-hour long trip with two wailing daughters didn’t please her, and she sighed again while exiting the room. The house was empty, as they had removed all the boxes and last furniture the day before. She went through the empty rooms and outside toward the rented suburban van. Her lack of luck had the twins’ suitcase at the bottom of the trunk and she started to remove bag after carefully packed bag, before a small voice interrupted her.

“What are you doing, mum?”

She huffed. “Your sisters decided that they didn’t want to travel without their favourite teddy bears, and I packed them in the bottommost suitcase.”

He looked at the trunk, frowning. Not understanding the frown, she started to remove another bag, when Harry’s voice interrupted her again. “These?”

Turning to him again, she was surprised to see two bears in her son’s hands. She reined her surprise and looked around in case neighbours might have seen something. Fortunately, they had decided to leave during the summer vacations, and the families were all gone. The remaining inhabitants of Privet Drive were old couples

and the hot afternoon guaranteed that they would be lying in their favourite recliners, fans working overtime.

She flashed him a thanking smile and, putting the bags in the van's trunk again, told him to bring them to his sisters. While he left, she reflected about this year's events. Harry had been bullied several times in school, mainly by Piers Polkiss' gang. As he had told her, even if he could have blasted them away –language, Harry!–, he had respected his promise not to use his talent outside of the house. Vernon had reacted, though, and the school had been forced to assign more teachers to oversee the children during the recesses.

Unbeknownst to his parents, Harry knew that he and little Jamie wouldn't be able to fight back as soon as the teachers would leave, though, and he started to think about discreet ways to get revenge on the bullies' gang. Several inexplicable and disgraceful accidents had then happened to the gang's members. Said accidents were never harmful, and they always involved mechanical defects which could have occurred even without Harry's push. There had been the time when Gordon found himself nude in a toilet, his clothes strewn haphazardly around the school grounds. Other bullies were drenched by passing cars, soiled water being on the street even on a dry day. Soiled pants and other toilet mishaps finally brought an end to the bullies' reign of terror on the school. During the whole episode, Harry discovered two things: he loved to prank bullies, and as long as he wasn't discovered, he could do anything. That's when he started to use his talent to hide and move discreetly.

Then, in May, Vernon had received an offer from the American branch of the drill company. It was the opportunity of a lifetime, and, after discussing about it overnight, he moved there to take the control of a whole tool-making factory in Urbana, Illinois. Petunia had spent two months packing their belongings, organizing the house sale, and the kind of things you do when you move far away. Her parents had helped, but, being quite old and tired, they couldn't do much more than keeping an eye on the kids.

Speaking of which...

"Harry! Jamie! Eva! Maureen! Come down here, we're leaving!"

1325 A.D., in pre-Columbian America...

The tribe had been walking under the blazing sun for hours, when their leader stopped suddenly

“Look, my brethren! Look!”

Despite their tired state, they hurried around him, and witnessed in awe as the great desert eagle was eating a snake on top of a large cactus. Their priest unrolled a scroll and fell to his knees, chanting and praising their numerous gods, for they just gave them their new home. A few sceptic minds asked themselves how they could build their new town in the middle of a lake, but they followed nonetheless.

“The first prophecy has come to realization.” the old priest was saying, climbing up to his feet with the help of his two aides. “After having left the arid lands of Aztlan, we will consider this island as ours and build our new realm starting here. We will call it... Tenochtitlan.”

The Aztec tribe settled down, and the men started to scout the surroundings for natural enemies and food while the women built the tents and tended to the children. During the whole process, the priest and his acolytes were sitting in a circle, discussing less mundane matters.

“Your Highness, what is it about the other prophecies?” asked one of the acolytes, more daring than the others.

“What do you mean?”

“The Prophecy of Destruction and the Prophecy of the Final Battle for the Sun.”

“Hmmm... why do you ask?”

“Because, of all the gods’ recorded words, those two reference our new city.”

“You are right.” answered the priest after a moment of thoughts. “However, we do have some time to think about it, don’t we?”

“Following the prophecy, it’s a mere 2500 moons before the Destruction, your Highness. It will come swifter than we think. And the Prophecy of the Final Battle for the Sun says that it will take 666 summers after our city’s foundation for the final battle between Tonatiuh, our Sun god, and the Tzitzimime, the demonic stars, to occur. How can we help our gods if we aren’t around for it?”

During the acolyte’s harangue, the priest had become more and more flushed, and the other aides recoiled, feeling that the old man would react quite violently. The bold one, taken by his speech, hadn’t seen his comrades’ movement.

“You are right.” the priest unexpectedly said, with a silky voice. “Our gods won’t have us beside them. But we can send them our support through time!”

“Err... what do you mean, your Highness?” the acolyte was quite frightened by the mad glint coming from the old man’s eyes.

“Our gods need help, I’ll send you to them.”

“No! Your Highness!”

“Be quiet! Don’t you agree to help our gods in their eternal fight? Didn’t you vow to serve them, and me, to your last breath?”

“Yes, but...”

“Very well, then. Acolytes! Prepare the ritual!”

The other young men jumped on the frightened one and, after binding him tightly, deposited him in the priest’s tent and gagged him as well. When they exited said tent, intent on building the required altar, the old priest was mumbling to himself.

“Wretched prophecies! Can’t have an upstart youngster challenge my authority! No, no... No one will know... It will be better that way.”
A peek into the future...

Albus Dumbledore looked at the assembled people, but his usual twinkle wasn't there. The day was August 15th, 1991, and it has been a fortnight since he had received the letter unanswered and unopened. He had since taken a look at the boy's personal file, and said file was open in front of him while he looked at the members of the Order of the Phoenix. His voice resounded in his office again.

"Can anyone tell me why we don't have anything in his file since 1982?"

"Albus, he could be dead-" a grizzled Auror spoke up.

"If he had been, Alastor, there would be something in his file about it. There is nothing!"

"Have you tried his home?"

"Yes, I have. The people there don't know anything about the previous owners."

"The real estate agency?"

"Their records have burned last year. Accidental fire."

There was a long silence in the room, while everyone wondered about the situation. Looking outside his window, Albus Dumbledore muttered the question aloud.

"Where in the hell is Harry Potter?"

To be continued in next chapter: Schooling and Fighting...

I'm writing this little view,
To make you want to review,
This quite long story of old,
Now, if I may be so bold.

Chapter 2 – Schooling and Fighting

posted June 8th, 2005

When Petunia Dursley and her kids arrived in their new home, they all were exhausted. Not only was the trip itself long and exhausting, but they had had several problems on the way. The Windy City was covered in thunderstorms, and they had to wait several hours stranded in a caged airport gate in Kansas City. The only thing they could think of right now was sleep. Petunia left to Vernon – who had arrived a few weeks before – the care to send the kids to their beds, and she dropped on the couch, asleep even before hitting the cushions.

The next day, they discovered their new house, much larger than the previous one. Each kid had his own bedroom now, even if the twins insisted to still sleep together. The neighbourhood looked clean and Vernon told them that he never had any problem there. The primary and elementary schools weren't far away, and Harry would be able to go there with a brand new bike. To appease any jealousy issue, Jamie and the girls got a new bike too. Vernon Dursley was successful in managing the factory, and was well rewarded for his efforts.

Unbeknownst to Harry, Vernon, joined later by Petunia, tried to find a magical school for him, but to no avail. They didn't know that wizarding schools weren't even noticeable by muggles, and the few people they asked looked at them strangely. None of them were wizards in disguise, too, and the Dursleys stopped asking after a few tries, after a bartender threatened to throw them out if they continued to spout drunken insanities.

So, Harry Dursley continued his muggle schooling, keeping on learning about his talent alone. After a few weeks in America, he was glad about one thing, though. He didn't have as many nightmares as before. His parents knew, of course, that he had a nightmare at least once a week in England. The psychiatrist had told them that nothing could be done, and they had believed him. However, he was now only experiencing these once a month at worst. He couldn't even tell them what they were about, but always woke up with a splitting headache, bringing a hand to his scar.

His scar.

It was a small scar, now, a pink dash in his otherwise normal skin. He had noticed, once, and had confirmed it through observation, that the pink dash always took an angry red colour when he awoke from the nightmares. He didn't remember, but Vernon and Petunia had taken him to a plastic surgeon in London when he was 3 in order to remove the ugly lightning bolt-shaped scar. The surgery had been successful, but the scar had reappeared afterwards, right after the first subsequent nightmare. It had reappeared as this little dash, though, and the Dursleys thought it innocuous enough not to treat it again.

Several times over the school year, the family went to the local park to spend quality time around a picnic. They weren't the only ones, and several large American cars were parked around the gentle slopes of the park. One of these times, a large SUV parked nearby, and an obese father, an obese mother, and their obese son extracted themselves from it. They forgot the handbrake, though, and the heavy vehicle began to gather speed on the slope. The first to notice it were the obese family, but they couldn't very well run after it, only yell about their loss. The yell attracted the Dursleys' eyes, though, and they noticed little Jamie playing on the grass a hundred feet away, right in the path of the speeding car.

Yelling to their son, Vernon and Petunia began to run, but they were too far to interfere. Harry was too far too, but he began to run nonetheless, calling for his talent at the same time. He didn't know what he wanted exactly, or how it could be done, but he wanted to be near his brother quickly.

A thunderclap later, a 7 years old boy took hold of his young brother and hoisted him out of the rampaging vehicle's way, following him. He wasn't quick enough, as the heavy car passed on his left leg, breaking it in several points. He howled in pain, but didn't pass out. Vernon and Petunia finally arrived to the accident site, each holding a daughter, having grasped them on the way. They found a crying Jamie and a wincing Harry. While Petunia tended to Harry's wound the best way she could, Vernon used his cell phone to call for an ambulance, then his legal counsel. The obese family had continued

to follow the car, not even glancing at them, and he intended to make them pay.

Harry noticed people gathering around and abhorred the feeling of being displayed. Reaching with his talent, he wished for every camera aimed on him to overexpose the whole film. He didn't know that it worked, but every photo film in the vicinity would end up totally blank.

In the ambulance, Harry couldn't hold it anymore and fell unconscious, thus easing the doctors' work somewhat. The ambulance left towards the closest hospital, the Dursleys following in Vernon's car. Once there, though, the doctors found that his knee had been completely smashed. They told the waiting parents that Harry had been lucky to be alive despite the massive haemorrhage, and that they shouldn't hope for him to walk anytime soon. Despite the bad news, they went to see him in his room, and found a pale kid, his nose in a medical book on anatomy. He looked up, startled at their entrance, but smiled even though he wanted to hide the book.

"Hi." he said timidly.

"Hello, son." said Vernon. Despite loving his family, the man was more cut to give orders in a professional environment, and he wasn't comfortable with Harry lying in a hospital bed. Petunia wasn't able to speak, though, as she hugged him in tears. Harry looked at Vernon, and spoke in a little voice.

"They did say I won't walk, didn't they?"

"Well..."

"Please."

Vernon sighed. Sometimes, Harry frightened him with his maturity. It was as if he had had a lifetime of experience even before starting his own.

"Yes."

“Hmmm hmmm.” he answered, and returned to his book.

Now that they were closer, Vernon and Petunia noticed the title. Anatomy, Disabilities, and Healing of the Knee. Taking in the child in front of her, Petunia remembered the frown. He always had it when...

Harry closed his eyes and extended his hand toward his wounded knee. “Better now than later.” he muttered before knotting his eyebrows in concentration.

The Dursleys suddenly realized that Harry was going to use his abilities to heal himself. That was going to be a large shock for the hospital staff if he succeeded, and Vernon didn’t want his family in the eye of the media.

“Petunia, go to the lobby and sign a discharge so that we can bring him home now. They don’t need to see this.”

She nodded and left, while he was guarding the room. His commanding stare and attitude pushed away two nurses and a doctor before Petunia came back with the form’s duplicate. Before leaving, though, Vernon made sure that the hospital would send the description of Harry’s injuries to his lawyer. Somewhere else, later...

The CIA agent looked at his informer in mild disgust. “What have you been drinking, this time?”

“Nothing, Jones, I swear! I-argh!”

The thin man couldn’t continue, as the agent named Jones had grasped him by the throat. Inching his face close to the man’s, Jones addressed him angrily. “I told you not to use my name! Are you too dumb to forget that? I thought a medic had more sense.”

When he released his grip, the man fell on the floor in a heap, panting. “He shouldn’t... be able... to walk.” he wheezed. “When I... checked on him... from afar, two days later... he was jumping. Jumping, Jo-err... Mister!”

“Why should I be interested in that, Ross? Visibly, your hospital people mixed radiology pictures.” Jones said, huffing.

The doctor looked at him. “You were the one asking me to inform you about strange medical events, remember? All those years ago, you told me some half-true bullshit about aliens and genetic mutations, requesting that I present you these events as soon as they occurred, or...” the man trailed off, not wanting to remember the blackmail material the secret agent had on him. “The hospital didn’t make a mistake. At least, not that time. I personally saw the boy’s leg, and it was a bloody pulp.”

Agent Jones scratched his chin, looking thoughtful for a minute, before glancing at the man. “Alright.” he merely said, before returning to his car.

“Alright?” asked Ross. “Alright what? What are you going to do?”

“It’s not your job to know what we do.” Jones merely said, before speeding away.

The doctor watched the departing car, and hoped that he had done what was best.

Back with the Dursleys...

A year after their moving in, the Dursley family took a week of vacation in Florida, like half of the employed population of America. The public beaches were crowded, but the financial position of Vernon allowed them to rent a spot in a private beach where they could play like a regular family.

Harry was still sore at his left knee, but it had healed quite well. The family had also received damages from the trial, and everything was going well under the sun.

When they came back, though, they found two persons sitting quite comfortably in their house’s den.

“Petunia dear, take the kids upstairs.” said Vernon in a barely controlled voice. Nobody ever broke into his house, and he was going to make them regret it. After his family left, an angry Vernon Dursley looked at the black clad couple.

“Who in the hell are you?” asked Vernon belligerently, moving around the room and surreptitiously heading toward his liquor cabinet, picking his phone on the way. “I’m going to call the police if you don’t leave immediately.”

He made a show of opening his folded cell phone, but saw that he wasn’t receiving any signal. Throwing the useless phone away, he went to open the glass door to the high shelf of his liquor cabinet, while still being under the watchful, unnerving, and amused gaze of his visitors.

“No need to call the police, Mr Dursley. Especially as we jumbled the signal.” said the man in a deep voice.

“And no need to get your gun, we unloaded it.” added the woman.

Defeated, Vernon reflected that these people weren’t burglars or killers, as they would have either emptied the house or killed him already if they had been. Sighing, he turned toward them.

“Well. If you already did all this, would you care to tell me who you are and what you want?” he asked, pouring himself a Four Roses.

When they didn’t comply, he decided to be the cheeky bastard and pulled two glasses out. “Perhaps you would talk a bit more over a glass of brandy?”

“The Four Roses would be fine. No ice, thank you.” said the man, not missing a beat. The woman huffed, while Vernon poured another shot of liquor.

He sat in front of them and gave the man his glass. They sipped it in uncomfortable silence, until a noise from the entrance startled him. He turned around to see a third visitor entering his house.

“Hey! Who are you and what do you want?” he asked the thin man with white hair.

“Stay calm, Vernon Dursley.” the man said. “I don’t think my partners told you anything yet, but I will. Sit back and enjoy your drink.”

The man then proceeded in telling him about them, and Vernon forgot he ever had a drink in his hand.

A month later...

While packing their stuff, the Dursleys reflected about their new situation. Vernon had told them, under the curious gaze of his wife and an inquiring look from Harry, that he had been sent to manage an even larger factory located in Zheng Zhou, China. The factory was American and its production included threaded cotton and cotton-based clothes. While telling them this, Vernon was shifting uncomfortably under Harry’s gaze, feeling that the kid knew more about his new job than even himself. But he couldn’t say anything, as the visitors who came to him a month ago made him swear on his family’s life. And, by their demeanour, he knew they would act upon their words. The advantages were numerous, though, and he was now a proud economic wheel of the American secret services.

The family uprooted itself again, travelling halfway around the world until they arrived at Beijing International airport. After discussing in halting English with the custom officers, they met Aurora Lee, their American contact there, and spent a night at the local Hilton. The following days, the family familiarized itself with the culture and language, and visited the numerous sights around the town. The girls were delighted by the change, Jamie was disturbed, and Harry was...

Harry was distant. He was taking everything in, though, and often discussed with their bilingual contact to learn bits of the language.

After the introductory couple of days, they took a domestic flight for their final destination, and entered their house, situated in the suburb of Zheng Zhou, not far from the factory itself. An American school had been built nearby a couple of years before, and it allowed the children of American employees to overcome the language barrier.

Something which disturbed Petunia, though, was that Harry never used magic anymore. He wasn't using it outside the house, as promised, but not inside either. However, she didn't talk about it for a long time, being quite taken by the household. After the first weeks, the family was finally installed, the kids schooled, and the neighbours met.

Harry knew something was amiss, though. While in England, and later in America, he had focused on understanding why and how he was able to make strange things, and often succeeded in repeating the feats after concentrating. Not wanting to be discovered, he had honed his powers to help him hide from "normal" people. In the privacy of his own room in Urbana, he had also experimented, and he was now able to sense if he was watched. This had been one of his main goal since Petunia had told him not to use magic outside. He actually did, several times, but never with witnesses around. In his new house, though, he felt watched all the time.

After ten months, almost nothing had changed. Vernon was managing the factory, thinking that it was his job, and earning a great lump of money out of it. Aurora kept dropping by every few days, and Petunia was having regular meetings with the neighbouring housewives. The four kids went to school as usual. The main change was their increasing interest in Chinese culture and language. Meeting Chinese children in the school, and having a Chinese course there, the kids learned the language very fast. Vernon was, too, because of his work. They also went to the Henan Opera, one of the greatest of China.

Two events, though, made Harry's life more... interesting.

The first one happened four months after their installation, after a long day at school. He had played a practical prank – without magic – on a fellow pupil, but got caught, something that was quite unusual. He had had a detention and left school in the evening, the sun already setting. He was walking toward his house when he noticed several large shapes in the street in front of him. The large shapes belonged to men, and, judging by their speech, they were Chinese, they were drunk, and they were aggressive.

He began to step back, intending to take a detour around them, but got spotted and the men began to advance toward him. Looking around, he noticed that he was still in the shopping district, but that most shops were closed, causing the street to be empty except for him and the five men.

He turned around and began to run. Their intentions were clear, and he didn't want to be beaten by racially prejudiced people. Turning in one street, then another, he knew that they were closing in and felt desperate. Perhaps he could use his magic, he thought while taking another sharp turn.

He stopped.

He was forced to stop.

He was lying in rubble.

The turn had been too sharp and, not noticing it in the darkness, he had fallen on a heap of rubble, drawing blood. He knew that he couldn't run now and the shouts were nearing his position. What could he do?

He closed his eyes and desperately hoped to look innocuous enough for his bigoted pursuers. He felt his magic working its way, and focussed to speed it up. In a separate part of his mind, he also knew that his magic had never worked that way before, and hoped that his focus would allow him to repeat the feat later. Now, though, he noticed that three of the five men had rounded the corner and were searching for him. When they found him, he recoiled in fright.

"Where has he gone?" one of them asked in Chinese.

He didn't understand how they could miss him, and looked frightful.

"Don't be afraid, son." another said through his alcohol-laden breath. "Just show us where the little wide-eyes bastard went."

Understanding that they weren't seeing him as an American child anymore, Harry almost smiled. He stopped just in time, though, and showed a side street to the three men.

When they left, he stood up and headed home, walking slowly. On the way, he passed in front of a store, and went to the shop's window to get a glance at himself.

And he gasped.

The mirrored boy gasped as well.

He smiled, and the boy smiled too.

Harry was quite happy about it. Not because he was seeing himself in a mirror, no. This he was doing everyday. It was because the boy looking back at him looked like a Chinese version of himself. He looked around and used his magic to sense the surroundings too. Noticing that nobody was there, he concentrated on his previous magical feeling, focussing on his real face. After another tingling in his face, he looked at the window again and was relieved to see his usual face looking back.

Afterwards, he got scolded by his parents for coming late, even and especially as it was because of a detention given because of a prank. During the whole scene, though, he was smiling internally. If he wanted to hide from the ever prying eyes around him, he had a way, now.

That episode made him think about something, and his thought got a concrete base when the monks from the nearby Shaolin monastery came to his school for a presentation. After seeing a kid his age dispatching a group of adults using kung fu moves, he decided to learn the martial art. He knew that what he was seeing was only a choreographed show, but his evening encounter pushed him to try. After nagging his parents for several days, they relented and took the whole family for a week-end in the southern hills where the temple was.

Lucky as they were, there was another exhibition programmed, and the Dursley were impressed too. As the school year was coming to an end, they accepted that Harry and Jamie spent the summer term in the martial art school there. The two boys were now proficient enough in Chinese to speak and understand the language, and Jamie was always going with his big brother everywhere.

Needless to say, several persons weren't happy with this development.

Harry felt as if he had been dunked below the polar caps, and he woke up with a gasp. The dream had been short and to the point: he was actually drenched in cold water, and a monk was standing beside him.

"Up, youngling."

He stood up immediately. In barely a week, he had learned the ways of the Buddhist monks, and had come to understand that physical prowess was also a feat of the mind. The first day, their head had been shaved, and they were given new outfits to reflect their novice status. They spent their days in four shifts: the first was to meditate until the sun rose. Then they would tend to the older monks' breakfast before being allowed to eat. That wasn't a torture but a way to make them conscious of their body and its limits, while reining in their feelings and needs. Several children weren't able to cope, and left after only three days. The second shift was about developing their body: running, push-ups, sit-ups, and other moves, before practising kung fu itself. Before the third shift, they tended to the monks' meal again to eat afterwards again. They then spent several hours meditating with their eyes closed, while a monk struck them with a bamboo staff randomly. It wasn't torture either, but a way to expand their senses, as well as raising their endurance. The fourth shift was a fighting period. At the end of each day, a kung fu fight occurred between two older monks, and another took place afterwards, between novices.

From the 49 novice kids entering the monastery for the summer term, only 21 made it to the middle of it. Those 21 were now hardened enough to wake up before sunrise by themselves, endure the meal torment and the bamboo wordlessly, and they had begun to learn to

fight properly. The following month included more specific meditations, to dissociate the body from the mind. They learned to practise uncomfortable postures to enhance their agility and flexibility, and they also learned how to use a weapon. They learned how to walk on burning coals, and how to channel their energy through a shout: the Kiai. They learned the points in the body that one should target to disable an opponent or to heal a fallen friend. All this was only introductory, however, as they couldn't compress centuries of wisdom and years of learning in a two-month period.

During the whole stay, though, Harry held back. Everything he learnt, as well as everything he witnessed from the older monks' fights, was quickly memorized, but his magic wanted to add to it. The first unusual event occurred a week into the advanced program, when they had been asked to strike a pile of clay tiles. The monks knew the pile was higher than anything the novices could destroy, and that most of them would go back to their dorm with an aching arm.

When little Jamie came to the pile, he was distraught at the previous participants' state and failed to concentrate enough. He succeeded in breaking one tile, but his size and position brought his forearm bone in contact with the tile, and said bone broke in two. Crying and bawling at the pain, he collapsed on the ground, holding his arm. Despite the monks' yells, Harry ran to his brother and gently took the arm in his hands. Hiding it with their ample outfits, he used his meditation-enhanced senses to see the broken bone, and used his magic to heal it.

Just in time.

The head monk, angry at him for disturbing the ranks, pulled him by the collar and dragged him in front of the tile pile before striking at him thrice with the bamboo stick.

Harry was angry. He was seldom angry, because he knew he had a reduced hold on his magic when it happened, and controlling himself was a paramount in his life. Now, though, his brother had been hurt because of a stupid challenge. He blinked several times, before remembering where he was. The pile of tiles in front of him represented the enemy, it had hurt his family, and it would pay.

He concentrated, and struck with an almighty Kiai, voluntarily adding his magic to the strike. Under his hand, the twenty tiles exploded outwards and clay shards flew everywhere. When the dust settled, the older monks could only watch in awe at the boy. Harry still had his arm down on the floor where the tiles had been, but there was no rubble there. And when the boy straightened up, they noticed something else, compelling them to dismiss the waiting class in order to examine the place. Shaolin monks weren't weak or anything, but they never saw a kid that young achieving that level of control over the matter.

After breaking the clay tiles, Harry's fist had continued downward, and it had cracked the floor tile itself.

The stone floor.

After that, they started to call him "Steely Fist" and tried to push him to repeat the feat, but Harry didn't want them to realize it had been anything else than a lucky hit. So he reined his feelings, and went on with the daily routine, steeling himself against the jabs and taunting of the monks.

However, the monks' attitude quickly transmitted to the other novices and Harry was starting to get mocked by them too.

Only once did another novice try to get a reaction from him: Wang-lu Chi'an was an older novice, and, having remarked Harry's protectiveness of his little brother, he decided to pick on him instead. The older teen waited until they were alone, and caught the 6 years old easily. Holding little Jamie by his outfit collar, he proceeded in telling where "wide-eyes" like them should be, and it wasn't a good place. Harry hated bigotry, and saw red instantly. Raising his head slowly, he looked at the other with a seething glare. He didn't do anything, though, because the offending novice froze at the sight of him, and Jamie used the distraction to kick him in the ribs, hard. The teenager was still in shock, reeling from the vision, and he dropped Jamie, who ran to his protective brother.

The two left, and never heard or saw Wang-lu anymore.

The only other public occurrence of him losing his cool was during the end of term tournament. Families were invited to the proceedings, and everybody cheered as the novice demonstrated what they had learnt, trying to subdue their opponents or throw them out of the cordless ring. There were no separate categories depending on age, as younger adversaries could be quicker and nimbler than bigger ones. However, little kids were still at a disadvantage, and Jamie experienced another bout of hate as Di-hao Teng, a muscular 12 years old, kicked him around the ring, not even pushing him out of it. The teenager got a penalty, but, pained by a broken rib, Jamie conceded the fight and the penalty didn't serve any purpose then. The little boy went back to his parents, clutching his pained chest, and beginning to hate his birthday.

Harry had watched the whole scene, and, once again, felt a cold rage taking hold of him. He didn't even notice his next adversary as he tossed him out of the ring. The rough teen was his adversary in the following match, though, and both of them smirked when getting on the ring. One of them had a good reason to, though.

Not needing anymore attention, Harry wanted it to look like a normal fight, but he wanted his opponent to be bewildered. He attacked the teen first, although his movements were slower than usual. His adversary easily dodged, and, laughing, sent his fist right toward Harry's heart, his fingers bent in a vicious move which could have killed...

...if Harry had actually felt it.

Di-hao yelped in pain, and looked between Harry and his stinging fingers, not understanding. Unbeknownst to everyone, Harry had used his magic to solidify his skin and it was now as tough as stone. He had had two months of daily beatings to perfect his technique, and it now wasn't using much magic or concentration, thus making it unnoticeable in this context.

Harry, now enjoying the fight, got into a dragon defensive position, right foot in front and both arms raised in front of him, ready to grab

his opponent. Said opponent, recognizing the form, adopted the tiger stance and lunged toward him, ready to tear him apart.

Harry didn't move at all, and a spark of joy danced in his opponent's eye, just before he struck. When he did, though, Harry grasped his arm and used his adversary's momentum to fling him in the air, landing in a disgraceful heap in the ring's corner. Several people laughed, and Harry was quite happy that his brother did too, despite the pain in the little boy's chest.

Di-hao went to his feet, looking between his fist and Harry. Noticing that he was having his back to him, he pounced on him, eliciting a yell from the crowd. Harry knew what was happening, though, and bent forward at the last moment, raising his leg backwards at the same time, and blocking his opponent's head with his foot. Di-hao, his momentum lost, fell to the ground again, and Harry took a few steps forward before turning toward him with cold eyes.

"Did you enjoy beating my little brother? He's half your age, you know. Did you enjoy it?"

The Chinese words echoed in the now silent arena, and everyone suddenly understood that this match had an underlying meaning to it.

Di-hao grunted and went to his feet again. He stepped toward Harry, and, looking him in the eye while smirking evilly, he spoke slowly. "I did."

He expected an answer from Harry, and was ready to catch him off-guard as soon as he would open his mouth. Which he did. "You-"

A right hook caught Harry unprepared and his head jerked backwards behind the strength of it. Di-hao began to smile widely, but lost it when Harry looked back at him. There was no trace of him being hit. No blood, no swollen tissue, nothing.

"What?" asked Di-hao.

"As I was saying, you'll regret this." answered Harry.

What followed was something that could have been filmed, if Harry hadn't made sure that nothing would record his fight earlier. Still, it was a sight to behold, and even the older monks took some ideas for future spectacles.

Di-hao was yelling, striking Harry repeatedly, using the five regular animal forms and even unusual others. He was sometimes hitting with two or three limbs at the same time, trying to get past Harry's defence. To no avail. Harry hummed all along, slapping his opponent's attacks away as if they were mere insects, and whacking the teen's head when he wasn't moving. After fifteen minutes, Di-hao was panting, his whole body was aching, and several haematomas were gracing his body.

"Do you yield?" asked Harry innocently.

"Never!" answered Di-hao and he used a surge of adrenaline to attack again, to be slapped away again.

After two minutes, Harry addressed the panting teenager again.

"Jump off this ring, you're not worthy."

"Aaaaarrrrggh!" was the inarticulate answer as the boy attacked him again.

This time, only one minute passed until Di-hao was panting in a corner again. Harry calmly walked toward him, and the tired teen tried to score a hit unsuccessfully again. Harry inched closer and Di-hao took a step backward, before understanding the other teen's goal. Straightening, he looked at him with all his contempt.

"You won't do that."

"Try me." answered Harry, while taking another step.

Di-hao's feeble attempts to attack him were pushed away gently, Harry knowing that it would infuriate the other even more. He continued to advance until his opponent was standing at the very edge of the ring.

“Jump off the ring.” he ordered once more.

“Never! I’ll never-”

Harry merely blew in his face, and the boy lost his balance, falling painfully on his back out of the ring. Harry looked at him a last time, with only contempt in his eyes, as his rage had passed.

Everybody cheered, and the next semi-final contestants got on the ring while Harry went to his family to enquire about his brother. He didn’t have time to heal him, though, as one of the contestants, a boy as young as he was, pushed the other out of the ring in mere seconds. Harry knew he had to be careful as something strange had happened. It was as if the other one hadn’t fought at all.

At the given announce, both finalists climbed on the ring, and Harry immediately knew that something was amiss. The other boy was even thinner than him, and he was strangely blond despite having an Asian face. It wasn’t strange to meet blond Asians, but most of them used hair dye. As they were shaven, he noticed that this one was a natural blond. Something else which disturbed him was reported by his heightened senses. Two dark auras came from his wrists, as if he had bracers.

But it wasn’t possible! The tournament rules forbid the use of external items. However, despite sensing these auras, he couldn’t see the bracers and supposed that others couldn’t too. Which meant...

...that the boy in front of him could use invisible things? Was he a wizard?

“Are you-” started Harry, before sensing a cold feeling taking hold of him.

“-winning, yes.” smirked his opponent.

Harry had to use every bit of his concentration and willpower to still fight, and his opponent was clearly surprised at his resistance. However, his smirk came back quickly, and he slowly but steadily

manoeuvred Harry out of the ring. Harry fell off, hitting his head on a bench, thus falling into unconsciousness. Just as he was falling, though, he noticed his opponent's name, displayed near the judges beside him.

Draco Malfoy.
Another peek into the future...

On August 31st, 1991, exactly two years after the tournament where Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy met for the first time, the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was pacing in his office, while his staff looked at him in wonder.

Albus Dumbledore never paced the ground impatiently. The old man was reckoned for his patience and benevolent nature. However, with Harry Potter missing and the rumours running loose about a possible reappearance of Voldemort...

The Headmaster wanted Harry at Hogwarts the next day.

"Enter, Severus!" he barked, not even concerned about the fact that the door was still closed.

The Potion Master entered the office and looked at the others, which only offered tired smiles and encouraging nods.

The Headmaster went directly to the point, though, not even offering the once-inevitable lemon sherbets. "Did you find anything in the real estate agents' minds?"

Severus Snape searched for a seat, and, not finding any, conjured himself one before talking.

"I explored the manager's first, and found the name of their agents since 1981. The man himself didn't have any information about our target. I then spent the week sifting through the useless minds of those muggles."

Despite his self-control, the man shivered a bit. Unsorted minds were always the worst when you searched specific information. And all these concerns about sex! Why were muggles obsessed with it? Most of his male targets thought of only one thing, thus encumbering their mind with it: getting between a woman's legs. The women's minds he sifted through were less oriented toward the act itself, but they were still cluttered with thoughts and memories about clothing and feelings. It wasn't until he found the 33rd agent that he finally found something of interest. Shaking himself, he continued his interrupted report.

"One of them remembered the Dursleys, but his mind only told me that they left toward America four years ago, in the state of Illinois. The money from the house sale was to be deposited to a bank account there, but he didn't remember the number, and the papers burned since."

After a silent pause, the twinkle came back in Dumbledore's eyes, and he smiled. "Thank you. At least, we have a lead. Now, do we know someone in America? Someone able and willing to help us, of course..."

To be continued in next chapter: Friends and Foes...

Why is the dragon in here?
Who are those people who hear?
Half the answer is written
already: chew what's bitten.

Chapter 3 – Friends and Foes

posted June 14th, 2005

A peek into the future: September 1st, 1991...

That fateful day, like each year, hundreds of anxious teenagers boarded the Hogwarts Express to head towards the magical school for a year of schooling in the way of wizards and witches. Some of them were especially restless as it was going to be their first year. Little Ronald Weasley, for instance, had been thoroughly warned by his twin brothers, who were ahead of him in school, and he wasn't really looking forward the incoming year.

Flashback: the previous evening...

"You know, Ronniekins, they will hold a Sorting Ceremony." began Fred.

George gasped, before continuing. "It's a very difficult test! They make you brew a potion with snake fangs and spider legs, and they force you to drink it!"

"You... you are joking, right?" asked Ron warily, suddenly thinking that going to Hogwarts wasn't a good idea at all.

"Of course not!" answered Fred, the perfect picture of innocence.

"Besides," continued George, "it's not the only test. Before that, they make you sit in front of everybody, and place a cursed hat on your head."

"My, my, my..." muttered Fred.

Ron looked at him in fright. "What?"

"The hat detects your every default, and yells them to the whole school." said Fred.

"And then, it places you in a House, depending on your mental abilities."

“However, if you aren’t deemed worthy...”

“...if you aren’t strong already...”

“...or if you were naughty in the previous week...”

“...it simply throws you out of the school...”

“...after cursing you to be a squib.”

Ron was looking between the two in fear. After trying to speak for a few minutes, he finally asked “But... I believed that squibs were born that way.”

“Really?” asked Fred.

“Of course, they would say that. It would depreciate the school if it was known.” said George, nodding thoughtfully as if it was a well-known plot.

“Remember Joseph Adrianson and Lynn Fearnson?” asked Fred to his twin.

George shook his head in sadness. “Yes. They had been so happy in the train, and they had to leave under everyone’s shouts.”

“I heard they are living with beggars in Knockturn Alley nowadays.”

“Sad, really.”

“And poor ole’ Percy...”

Ron’s head shot up at the mention of his brother. Percy was a fifth-year Prefect and the twins surely knew things about him in school. “What about Percy?”

The twins looked between them, before whispering “He got almost rejected, but he grovelled so much that the Headmaster accepted him on probation.” said Fred. “For the entire duration of your education.”

he added in a voice sounding like an old and wise – and stern – wizard. Ron immediately thought it was Dumbledore.

“Why do you think he works so much?” confirmed George.

The young redhead was already afraid of the next day’s course of events, but the scheming twins weren’t done yet.

“Before that ceremony, though, they make you cross a lake where a giant krakken lives.” started Fred.

“What’s a krakken?” asked an already shaken Ron.

“It’s a gigantic squid, which beak can crush whole metal-clad ships. And you have to cross the lake on mere wooden skiffs.” answered George.

Fred continued his speech. “They say that the krakken sleeps during the passage, but most years, it feeds on one or two students on the way.”

“You’re joking, right?” asked Ron in a trembling voice.

“We aren’t!” they exclaimed together, a hand on their heart.

“In our year, we lost one girl.” started Fred again, before turning toward George. “Remember that Lisa Rapford? A tentacle took hold of her, and dragged her in the water.”

“Yes. A pity for such a beautiful girl.” continued his brother. “I’ll always hear her screams in my nightmares.”

They stayed silent for a while, as if reminiscing about the event.

George spoke first this time. “With the magic we learnt, we could have done something, though.”

“Yes.” answered Fred. “We learnt many spells, curses, and jinxes.” He looked at Ron, as if deciding something. “But I don’t know if we should tell our little brother about this.”

“Please! I want to know, please!” begged Ron.

The twins shared a private smile, before looking at their brother with concerned frowns.

“Of course, you can’t try anything before we leave for Hogwarts.” said Fred.

“Yes,” answered George, “or the Ministry would have your hide.”

“You have to promise.” insisted Fred.

Ron looked fearful but decided at the same time. “I promise I won’t try anything before leaving for Hogwarts.”

“Okay, Ron. Now there are a few incantations. The first is to change the colour of something. You’ll have to use your wand to achieve them, so you can repeat them now without problem.”

“Now, repeat after me, and remember that you have to make appropriate rhymes.” asked George conspiratorially.

“By the winds of the north,
maketh magic flow forth,
I’m not the worthiest teen,
but change this colour green.”

Back to the Hogwarts Express...

Ron had drunk his brothers’ words and they had kept him up late. Of course, it has resulted in a lie-in, and his mother had yelled at his tardiness – something which didn’t ease his feelings at all. Because of him, they arrived just in time and had to run to board the last wagon directly, the others being already full. After finding an empty compartment to settle down, the Weasleys parted ways. Percy went to his Prefect meeting, and the twins told Ron about their friend Lee Jordan’s new tarantula. Ron went pale because of his arachnophobia, and he stayed in the deserted compartment.

Once alone in the moving compartment, he remembered last night's conversation, and was soon positively shaking in fear. What if he had to go back home because he hadn't been worthy? His mother's wrath would be more than anything he had experienced. He could try to grovel before the Headmaster, but he knew he wasn't hard-working enough to spend seven years on probation.

He decided to test himself in the privacy of the empty compartment, to see if he was actually worthy, and, after extracting his pet rat from a pocket, he drew his wand and aimed it on the quivering animal.

Just as he was calmed enough to start the incantation, the door opened and a bushy-haired girl with prominent teeth entered, asking about some boy's lost toad. When she noticed the drawn wand, though, she asked to see him trying his magic. Of course, the incantation given by the twins didn't work at all, and the girl giggled before telling him that spells were always said in Latin.

Ron was worried, because he didn't remember the twins telling him that, but they didn't mention the contrary either. The girl, however, stayed in the compartment and began to talk to him about the numerous books she had read about magic, several more than once. She also introduced herself as Hermione Granger. All in the same breath.

Ron didn't know what to think about her, because, despite her expressiveness, she was quite disdainful about his lack of reading. After five minutes of soliloquy, she understood that he wasn't interested in her retelling of *Hogwarts: A History*, and, taking her leave curtly, she left the compartment.

Ron sighed. The upcoming year was definitely not looking bright.
The original timeline: September 1st, 1989...

Harry had spent a great deal of energy in the tournament, and his parents, after bringing him home, put him in his bed where he slept soundly until early morning. When he woke up, he immediately jumped on his feet, his mind still in a fighting mode. He wasn't in an arena, though, but in his bed, and the covers, tangled around his legs,

made him stumble and fall on the floor. His young brother was sleeping in the same room, and the noise woke him up. They looked at each other for a few seconds before erupting in laughter at the situation.

James' laugh stopped short, though, and Harry was surprised at his brother's suddenly sad face.

"What is it, Jamie?"

"Dad said we're moving again."

"Moving? But... but why?"

James shook his head. "He didn't say. I only saw that the people in black came again."

Harry shook his head. The 'people in black' were those who had asked them to move here originally, so why would they ask to leave now?

While waiting for breakfast time, they discussed calmly about the tournament, and about their two-month stay at the temple. The students had followed different masters, depending on their abilities, and Harry had been quickly sorted with the most advanced ones, even if he was holding back his magic. That's why he had been able to learn such a large number of techniques. His brother James, for instance, had merely learnt two fighting forms and three vital points. After he tried to explain to his brother the difference between the dragon and the snake forms, their parents called them to the breakfast table.

Still having the habit of serving their masters, the two kids impressed the Dursley parents by doing exactly that before sitting to eat their share. While Harry was eating his blown rice cereals, though, his mind was replaying his last match, trying to analyse what had gone wrong.

Unbeknownst to him, at the same time, a debriefing session was happening in a huge manor far away.

“Now, Draco, I am expecting an apology.”

The boy, the illusion covering his face lifted, looked at his father with fear in his heart. He knew that the man wouldn't hesitate to skin him should he fail him again. However, his education, doubled with the two-month stay with those filthy muggles had hardened him enough to hide his emotions now. He drew a deep breath and launched the rehearsed speech he had spent all his recent free time to prepare.

“Father, I do apologize. It was inappropriate for me to make the comments about Mother while you were holding a reception, and I shouldn't have thrown a temper tantrum. I'm ready to work hard to repay you in everything.”

A silence. Several heartbeats of fear under Lucius Malfoy's scrutiny, before his father spoke again.

“I might take you up on that, Draco. I hope that your stay with those... muggles,” in his mouth, the word had acquired a new taste of disgust, “has taught you not to go against me ever. Moreover, I have been told that this particular way of living reinforces strength and discipline. Despite the impressive display in the... what did they call it again? Tournament? Well... whatever the case, I hope that you will live up to your name from now on. You have already started by staying the whole duration as required, as well as winning this little muggle get-together.”

At Draco's shameful stance upon being reminded of having lived with muggles for two months, with no less than four glamour charms to disguise his features, Lucius felt he had to press the lesson harder.

“The Malfoy name, son, has always been the one to emerge victorious from any and all conflict, whatever the mean used. We have always had power, and the will to use it. Let me repeat our family motto: The end justifies the mean. If I have to put you in a muggle camp to force you to learn discipline, I do it despite my profound disgust of them, and I have no doubt that you would do the same for your own descendants should they be as... disgraceful as you have been.”

“I understand, father. I won’t fail you again, I promise.”

Another pause, and Lucius’ face lit with a rare smile.

“Despite your obvious advantage on your opponents, in the form of the bracers I gave you, I’m proud that you won the tournament without displaying your true power. The end justifies the mean, but you have to stay discreet when the mean used isn’t particularly liked. If they had had a wizard judge, though, I would have provided you with another mean to win. Remember this: a Malfoy never loses. Our honour states so.”

It never entered the formatted minds of Lucius and Draco that it was a twisted kind of honour. But, even if it had, they wouldn’t have cared. They weren’t Slytherin for nothing.

The day was looking bright. September was a beautiful season with the cherry trees starting to lose their colourful leaves. The third day of September wasn’t looking bright to the Dursleys, though.

Once again, the family’s luggage had been dragged around an empty house. Once again, a cab would lead them to the airport. Each member of the family reflected about their next destination. The trio in black had appeared three more times, the last one asking for the whole family to attend. They had then told them that they were going to live for some time on the French Riviera.

The agents had explained to Vernon that they were happy about his results here, and he was now expected to run a nightclub. Vernon and Petunia had talked about this, but couldn’t fathom how he was going to do that. Vernon was the kind of man at ease in an industrial setting, and he was quite afraid of changing his whole environment in one go. The advantages were obvious, though, as Petunia had told him twice. The nightclub itself was located in Monaco, drawing many a customer already. The family would live in the nearby town of Beausoleil, and the children would be home-schooled until they grasped the language. The sunny beaches nearby and the numerous sights around finally convinced Vernon that it was a good place to live with his family.

Eighteen hours of flight and two stops afterwards, they arrived in the airport of Nice-Côte d'Azur, where their contacts were waiting for them. The agents had dropped their black jackets because of the hot sun, but they were still recognizable, and the group of nine quickly left the airport toward two white 505s thankfully equipped with air conditioning. Petunia and the girls, as well as James and the still-unnamed woman went in the second, while Vernon and Harry were directed in the first by the other two agents.

On the way to their new home, one of the agents gave a walkman to Harry. Curious about the man's kindness, Harry put it on and listened to the music while the man talked with Vernon.

The agent, who asked to be called Jones, explained Vernon's new job in more details. He was to manage the discotheque from behind the scene, with the occasional mingling with rich and powerful clients. However, the club was also going to be a spot where agents from secret services around the world – friendly ones, that is – would meet or rest, so he had to keep the two activities separate and functioning.

And so, the family began to settle down again.

The first thing they remarked was that their house was smaller than the Chinese one. However, it wasn't worse at all, given the nice neighbourhood made of beautiful Mediterranean buildings. Some of them even had Doric columns in the style of ancient Greece. When they entered, they immediately remarked the large windows providing bright sunlight everywhere. They also noticed the discreet air conditioning system preventing the large windows from overheating the house at the same time. Petunia was impressed by the beautiful kitchen, artistically tiled in a Provençal way, while Vernon loved the overall architecture. There were only three bedrooms, but each was large enough to accommodate two persons. The twin girls would sleep in the same room, as would the boys do.

After a good and long first night there, they met Amélie Dampierre, the woman who was going to help them to settle down. The first month, the family, minus Vernon, only learnt to speak French. To learn quicker, they were forbidden to use another language for the whole month, and thus learnt quickly the most used terms and

sentences. Afterwards, Amélie spent half the day teaching the children more about the language so that they wouldn't be lost at school, and she accompanied the whole family on sightseeing trips in the area. They didn't go far, though, because Vernon was working all the time, and Petunia didn't want to leave the area without him. They visited Monaco's museums and gardens, as well as nearby towns, like Nice, Cannes, and Grasse. Since the frontier was a mere 6 miles away, they made trips to Italy on several occasions as well.

Vernon was working on most weeks' nights, as well as the week-end. He had started, like his family, by being taught the necessary French to use in his new environment, as well as a bit of German, Italian, and Spanish because of the proximity of these countries, implying the occasional client speaking only these languages. While doing his job, he realized that he wasn't impaired by his industrial background. He had always been a man of contact, something which had helped in the industry, and which facilitated his new job tremendously. He often patrolled in the club, having a few words with the bouncers and the barman, and distributing handshakes and free drinks to the usual patrons.

When Halloween approached, everyone was doing fine, and they joyfully prepared for the celebration. Vernon had finally managed to open the 'underground' activity of his club, and was more available to his family, even if he couldn't speak about his job to them. However, each time he eluded a too inquisitive question, he caught Harry's piercing gaze.

In the almost two months since their installation, Harry had often felt that he was observed, even in the house. He thus refrained from using his magic until he was in an enclosed space, with walls all around. Unfortunately for him, the house's large windows prevented this. He could only do so in the bathroom, something he enjoyed. After his loss at the kung fu tournament, he had thought about his magic, and about how he controlled it.

More often than not, he just had to wish for something, concentrate on it, and it happened. Other times, he had to be in a particular state of mind. He severely lacked proper tuition in that, though, and his parents couldn't help him at all. The boy, before meeting his last

tournament opponent, had always thought to be one-of-a-kind, an oddity, and hid his talent most of the time. Now, in the quietness of the bathroom, he tried to expand his senses so that he would be able to feel others like him.

At first, he was quickly drained and only sensed the other family members in the house. However, as he progressed, it was more and more easy, to the point of almost being an unconscious thing. He was also covering a larger and larger ground, feeling people several buildings around. Needless to say, when he discovered what these people were doing, he quickly learnt about intimate human relationships. To his dismay, he also discovered the three 'agents' who had sent his family to China and here afterwards. He wasn't able to actually hear or see them, though, and only felt their 'identities'.

Since their arrival, the family had never encountered the three agents again, and Harry couldn't understand why they were so near, and what they were doing with strange-looking material. After several days of mentally prodding around the three agents, he started to concentrate more on their location. He felt his magic tugging at him, but resisted the call, and nothing happened yet.

The experience made him hungry, and he escaped the bathroom toward the breakfast table, filling himself up in preparation for another day of doing mathematics in French. It wasn't until three days passed and Amélie left for the Celtic holidays, that he tried to do it again. This time, he let himself be pulled along, but focussed on moving slowly. He didn't want to rush into anything.

Once he accepted the pull, the whole house around him started to lose its solid aspect, becoming more of a smoky substance. He realized that his magic was pulling him toward the location he had concentrated on, and started to follow the trail he was a little anxious when he faced the bathroom's smoky wall but, after noticing that his arms passed through without problem, he continued until just inside the agents' room. Once there, he braked somehow and stopped a few inches from the place he had wanted to arrive. For some reason, he thought that, once on his arrival point, he would be solid again. He wasn't solid. It was the only reason explaining why he passed through

walls. However, when he noticed what was happening there, he began to be quite nervous.

Now that he was in the agents' room, he could hear what they were saying, and they were panicked.

"Where is he?"

"He disappeared!"

"How?"

"We have to find him now!"

"Have a look at the monitors!"

"He's nowhere around!"

"Expand the range! The detector can deliver his signal miles away!"

"Not found. Shall we search the house?"

"Yes, go already!"

Through the discussion's content, Harry understood that they were talking about him. He was beginning to understand a great deal of things, but also knew that he had to come back quickly or else they would crash into his parents' house. He concentrated on the bathroom where he had been before, and allowed the magic to pull him back into it. When he finally reappeared, he heard a frantic knocking sound at the closed door.

"Harry! Are you alright? There are people at the door asking for you. Are you alright? Harry?" asked Petunia.

Harry knew he had a very slim margin and concentrated hard on a bathtub full of soapy water. Once done, he focussed on his body being naked, his clothes thrown haphazardly around. He was just dunking his whole body underwater as the lock opened from the outside – apparently, Petunia had fetched a screwdriver. He then

realized something. In his hurry, he had filled the tub with cold water. He couldn't help himself and sat up in it with a yelp.

The sound frightened Petunia who gave a startled shriek too.

A pause.

"Why didn't you answer, Harry?" asked Petunia, not looking at him directly.

Harry had thought about it when constructing the scene, and he answered "Sorry, mum. I had my ears underwater. I was washing my hair, and I didn't hear you. You called me?"

"Yes. Remember the people we saw in China, the ones who sent us here?" At Harry's nod, he continued. "Well... it seems that two of them are at the door, they wish to see you."

"Okay. I'll be downstairs in a few minutes, mum."

"Alright."

When she left, he sighed, and prepared himself to meet the agents. While doing so, he reflected about them, and about himself. He had often felt observed, and understood that they must have covered the house with cameras, like in China. That would partly explain why they are providing the house each time instead of letting them choose it. However, they must have changed something between China and here, because, while still feeling observed, it was a farther feeling. He reflected that the cameras must be outside here, which would explain his relative security in the closed bathroom. Now the £1000 question was: Why in the hell were they spying on him?

The answer made him start, gasping at his reflection. He shuddered at the implication of it. They knew something, and had watched him for... one year? Two years? Thankfully, he had felt their watch. He shuddered again upon thinking about what they could do to him if they caught him. The few action movies he had seen about the secret services didn't show them in a good and trusting light.

He laced his shoes, his mind still whirling with questions and possibilities. Looking at his shoes, though, he reminded something. The agents had spoken about a detector thingy. They must be tracking him, he reflected, and they must be doing so... how?

He didn't have time to ponder about this, though, because Petunia called for him from downstairs. Time to face the music, he thought, and exited the bathroom.

Finally, they didn't say anything of importance. The woman agent, who asked to be called Carlita, enquired about his well-being, while agent Jones looked around. Surprised at the man's attitude, Harry tuned Carlita out and frowned, wishing he could hear the man's thoughts. Wishing... Concentrating... A second later, he could perceive a faint voice, sounding like agent Jones', talking about lack of precautions concerning a certain bathroom. He jumped in surprise upon hearing the man, but covered it smartly by invoking his thirst, and he left to serve himself a pint of orange juice.

The agents left soon after, and Harry was left alone to ponder on his life. His half-emptied glass in hand, he excused himself and headed to his bedroom to sit and think.

The first question was about their reason for spying on him, and what it entailed. Was it because of his talent? Were they real secret agents? Did they have connections with other people like him? If they didn't tell anything, though, it was perhaps because they hid them. Were they torturing the people able to do magic? Were they making experimentation on them? In his increasingly restless state, he was quick to jump to conclusions, and immediately inferred that he was it the reason behind the family moving around the world. After all, the agents immediately reacted when he disappeared from the house.

He frowned. How could they know when he left? If his senses were right, he hadn't been actually watched in the bathroom. He closed his eyes and concentrated, in the same way as when he sensed the world around him, but this time, he focussed on his own body. He scanned his head, his arms, his chest, his legs...

His legs!

There was a little something in his left thigh which didn't belong there! Reflecting about it, he supposed that it had been put there in China, when he had made a brief stay in the hospital after twisting his ankle at school. His frown intensified. He wasn't happy to find that he was marked, not happy at all. He wished...

No.

If the thing disappeared, he would have the agents on his back in minutes.

"Harry!" came a voice from downstairs.

Sighing, he lifted his glass again, only to find it empty, and, shrugging, he went downstairs to help Petunia preparing the dining room for Halloween. Even if their dad wasn't going to be there, they could have a good dinner together.

A few hours later, in a darkened nightclub...

"Thell uss vhere he iss!"

The man was angry, but Vernon had dealt with drunken patrons before, and he didn't think he would have any problems to oust the two men in front of him. While he repeated not knowing about an Oliver Jones, he detailed their strange garb. How could people stand the local heat in their coats and hats? He smiled. They looked like...

Uh oh.

They looked like spies. And their accent...

He lost his smile, and started to look around for help, but there was no help available. The club was just closing, the bouncers had surely left, and the barman was held in check by his supposedly drunken patrons. Looking at them again, he jumped in fright. The muzzle of a 9mm Makarov was looking straight at him, and he staggered backwards, fully understanding the risks of his job now. Until now, he had only built a set of rooms to be used by select people, like a hotel.

His feet encountered a chair, and he fell on it heavily, almost fainting from the initial shock.

"I repeat." said the man. "Where iss Mr Jones?"

"I... I..."

"Vell?"

"I don't know, sir."

"DONT LIE TO ME!" the man bellowed, before smacking Vernon with the gun. Vernon's lip split and blood began to drop on his white jacket, but the spy wasn't finished. "Ve saw he go in your home. You must no he!"

"I don't know, sir. I haven't met any Mr Jones... since two months ago. I know nothing... about his place of stay... nor how to contact him." Vernon stuttered, staring at the gun in fright.

The supposed spy looked at him pointedly for two minutes, before calling his colleague in a guttural tongue. Vernon was thinking that they believed him, and was starting to feel relieved. What the man did next, though, sent that notion into pained oblivion.

BAM!

BAM!

Pain radiated from his wounded leg as he crumbled in a bloodied heap on the floor. He was so stunned that he didn't hear the man talking to him, and it wasn't before being kicked in the ribs that he looked up at his assailant. His ears were still ringing from the detonations, though, and he couldn't understand everything from the man's speech.

"... arr goin' ... family ... until you ... call dis ... ffind Jones ... hear me?"

The man was clearly asking him a question. Not wanting another bullet, Vernon acquiesced madly, before passing out. Smirking at

Vernon's lack of resistance, but not wanting the man to bleed to death, the spy called for an ambulance to come there.

They didn't wait, though, and left the premises quickly, leaving a dead barman behind as a warning. It was 3:30 in the morning and the street was empty. Even on this November 1st.

The two Russian spies contacted another pair who were standing guard in front of a house with large windows. Their first target hadn't answered, so they would pass to the next part of the plan: using family as an appropriate leverage. They broke in stealthily, and used sleeping gas and subsequent intravenous injections to ensure the family's slumber during the scheduled long trip: if they were going to detain them, the best solution was to keep them in a secure environment, and it would take them days to arrive to their destination. A week later...

When Harry woke up, he immediately felt the beginning of a monumental headache. Despite the pain, he quickly noticed that he wasn't in his bed, nor even in his bedroom. He was in a small room, without a window, and equipped with a camera in the corner facing him. The door was a sturdy-looking lump of metal with a barred window, and a platter with stale bread and dank water was resting on the ground nearby. Looking around, he noticed that he wasn't alone, as his brother James, clad in his pyjama like him, was uncomfortably sleeping on the other mattress, struggling as if in the throes of a nightmare.

Because of his headache, Harry wasn't able to concentrate properly, and he couldn't even start to think about magic at all. Not having anything else to do, he went to his brother and, lying alongside his quivering body, he tried to comfort him. His own body was still aching from something he wasn't aware of, and he fell back asleep.

He woke up hungry like never before. He wolfed half of the bread as if he hadn't eaten in days, which was surely the case. That thought made him stop, acutely remembering his brother. As he stopped eating, he also heard something from outside. Even if he didn't know where he was, the sounds he perceived were unmistakable.

There were people fighting out there. Shouts, gunshots, cries of pain... the international language of battles. His headache was gone, now, and he concentrated to feel the surrounding building and the people there. In the cell on his right were Petunia and the twins, and he perceived that they were barely alive. On his left, another prisoner was pacing, mumbling something in a foreign language. In the cells on the other side, three persons, two men and a woman, were lying on their mattresses, unconscious. There were no guards, and he supposed that they were all outside warring against god-knows-what.

He resolved to escape, but he had to ask about his location first, and he wanted to speak with the pacing prisoner first, hoping he would speak English. Or French. Or Chinese. Closing his eyes, he remembered his trip through walls back home, and concentrated on the corridor. Letting the magic pull him, he found himself there, in front of his own cell door, and noticed that there was no locking mechanism, merely a bolt. He went to the cell with the conscious prisoner.

“Hey!”

“Was? Was willst Du denn?” answered the man angrily.

“Err... I’m sorry. Do you speak English?”

The man seemed to notice something and looked at him through the bars. His eyes went wide when he noticed Harry. He didn’t expect a kid to talk to him there, especially in English. And in his pyjamas.

“Ein Bischen. Err... I say... a small.”

“I want to escape and I can help you too, but I want to know some things first. Who are you? Who are they? And, more importantly, where are we?”

“...” the man looked confused.

Harry sighed, he hadn’t thought of the difficulties regarding the language before, and he couldn’t very well let the man alone now or

he would yell until the guards come back from whatever fighting they were still doing outside. He closed his eyes, and concentrated on hearing the man's thoughts, like he already did with agent Jones, back home.

He felt his magic tugging at him again, although it wasn't about his body now, but his mind. Letting himself go, he found himself in the middle of a strange landscape, with a tendril of magic still tied to his head. Unconsciously knowing that he only had to pull on it to go back, he started to explore what he understood being the man's mind.

...and he found several interesting facts.

First, the man was German. A German spy precisely. And working for the West.

His next finding was about the place. They were in Berlin, held in the Russian quarter of the town by some Russian secret service, the building itself being near the infamous Wall.

Digging deeper in the mind structure, he found something interesting. The man's mind was separated in several parts, and Harry supposed that it was the same for everybody. There were parts about his job, parts about his family or lack thereof, and parts about his general knowledge. Some of these parts were floating around, while others were firmly entrenched in the psychedelic landscape. Harry was going to pull back when he noticed that one of these blocks was labelled 'Language'. He supposed that it reflected the man's ability to speak, and wondered if he could copy the block into his mind so that he would be able to speak German too. The instant the thought finished, he was contemplating, stunned, a floating block emerging from the man's Language centre, and heading his way. He barely had time to grasp the return tendril and start to pull when the block hit him.

Harry stumbled on the floor holding his head, only just containing his screams of pain. The German spy looked at him in wonder. The boy, who could help him escape, had fixed him for a long time before collapsing, visibly in pain.

"Was hast Du? Bist Du krank oder was?" he asked, clearly agitated.

Harry looked up, still in pain. Did the man ask if he was ill? He winced, and opened his mouth to answer.

“Nein danke, ich bin...”

He stopped speaking, surprised, while the man looked at him pointedly.

“I thought you didn’t speak German.” he asked in German.

“I forgot.” answered Harry in the same language.

“You FORGOT?”

“Shh! Listen, if I free you, will you help me and my family to return home in France?”

The man pondered the proposal. He didn’t know how the kid could know he worked for the West, but if they were both from the same side and both prisoners, it was a possible reasoning.

“I’ll help you. Let’s free my colleagues too. I hope they aren’t too hurt to follow. Judging by the sounds, the fighting stopped, so let’s go, quick!”

Harry unbolted the door, and the man walked unsteadily towards his friends’ cells while Harry opened his family’s. Waking Petunia first so that she could carry on with the twins, he went to his brother next. James was shivering in fever, and Harry was going to carry him when the German spy entered the cell.

“Let me carry him. What’s your names?”

“His name is James, and I’m Harry.”

“Okay, Harry. I’m Jorg, and my friends are Steffi, Gunther, and Uwe. Uwe is the large, bald one, you can’t miss him.”

“Thanks for helping us, Jorg.”

“Thanks are for later, kid. Let’s flee now.” He looked around a last time. “And eat the remaining bread, you’ll need it.”

They stumbled toward the now silent exit, wary of what lied there. They turned a few times, and stopped once to open a door with a Russian word written on it. Harry, to his utter surprise, could read it, and suspected that he hadn’t got only German from Jorg’s mind. It was the armoury.

The German spies equipped themselves with AK47 and spare clips, and gave Harry and Petunia a sturdy knife “Just in case.” Petunia was barely awake, and the fact that Harry understood and spoke German didn’t register her clouded mind yet.

When they arrived in view of the exit door, they noticed two things: it was littered with bodies, and there was the faint sound of police cars in the distance. Getting nearer the spies remarked that the uniforms on the bodies belonged to two armed factions, namely the KGB and the East German police. And there were no survivors.

“We don’t have much time. Hurry!” said Gunther, leading them outside. The others pressed on, still encumbered by their charges.

Once in the relative safety of a darkened alley, they sat down, and Steffi, the most proficient in English, began to recap the setting. They were fugitives in East Berlin, with no papers, and charges to take care of. They had to pass the Wall to be able to bring the family back home, but the KGB agents would soon notice their disappearance, and they couldn’t pass as a group. They had to split.

As she was speaking English, she agreed to bring Petunia and the twins home with Uwe, while Jorg and Gunther would take care of Harry and James. Crying, the family embraced and they separated. Harry felt as if he wouldn’t see his mother and sister for a long time.

He couldn’t be closer to the truth.

After walking several hours through small streets and other alleyways, Gunther stopped them and put his hand to his ear to listen. Harry

noticed the sound and closed his eyes to expand his senses in that direction.

People.

Lots of people.

And they were shouting.

What was it about?

“Let’s advance.” said Jorg, still carrying James on his back. “We’ll be more secure in a crowd.”

They proceeded and met an enthusiastic crowd. Jorg and Gunther looked around, bewildered. No one had seen a happy crowd in East Berlin for a long time. And they were walking toward...

...toward the Wall!

They wanted to turn back, not wanting to be nameless victims of the blood bath that would ensue once the crowd would reach the vopos’ territory limit. The Wall guards were renowned for using their firepower on each and every trespasser, and had killed more than 200 persons since the building of the Wall.

They couldn’t leave the pressing crowd like that, though, and were forced to advance. However, the danger didn’t take form, as the fearsome policemen didn’t even lift their weapons on the mass of people. They were perhaps impressed by the similar crowd sounds coming from the other side.

Jorg and Gunther looked around, astonished. Was it finally happening? From the front of the crowd, now touching the 12-foot high wall, they heard unmistakable sounds of hammers on stone, and noticed a demolition engine on the other side.

It was happening. The infamous Wall was falling.

Today was November 9th, 1989.

To be continued in next chapter: Missing Family...

Now you know about the spies,
And about the dragon's plies.
More will follow if I have
Time to ignore real life.

Chapter 4 – Missing Family

posted June 22nd, 2005

A peek in the future: 1991 timeline...

In the first months of this new school year, Albus Dumbledore was a busy man. With a school to run and his other "important" activities, he scarcely had time for society life. His days were spent managing the huge school he was responsible of, and most of his evenings and early nights were spent in meetings. Sometimes with the Order of the Phoenix, sometimes with the Wizengamot, sometimes with the International Council of Wizards, and sometimes with powerful individuals who needed his advice on some topic or another.

One of these persons was a portly and exuberant little man, bordering on pomposity. Cornelius Fudge wasn't a powerful wizard per se, but he still was Minister of Magic. And, as he had been elected with a bit of help from Albus, he deemed necessary to meet the old man on regular occasions. Albus sighed. There were times like that when a bit of help transformed into a pain in the rear.

Displaying his usual genial demeanour and smile, Albus Dumbledore studiously ignored Fudge and let his thoughts turn relentlessly around the same subject: Harry Potter.

The American wizards he had contacted had been reluctant to give him information about the Boy-Who-Lived. The political state of the Wizarding world was quite retarded when one dared comparing it to the muggles'. The countries included in the British Commonwealth were considered living under the British Ministry of Magic, as well as some of the nearest, poorest ones. However, the recently finished conflict in the Persian Gulf had thinned the international cooperation between wizarding countries and Albus Dumbledore wasn't able to use the bulk of his political strength right now – unless he wanted some additional unrest on his hands.

He had wanted to get information through the Floo, and had been unsuccessful. He didn't have the necessary manpower to send Order members there either, especially as most of them were teachers in a school going full-swing. The others were already on a quest for

information about the break-in at Gringotts. Once again, his instincts had paid off. By sending Hagrid to bring the stone back to him, he had prevented a major catastrophe. He had had inklings about a return to life of a forsaken soul, and since that fateful day, he was quite sure it was Voldemort. He hadn't told anyone, though. He wanted a calm environment to track the movements of the accursed soul, not a full-scale panic allowing Voldemort to realize his dark intentions.

His calmness was denied, though, because of the trip he had to prepare in order to seek Potter himself. Nodding along to the chubby Minister's words, he planned his trip in his head. Tomorrow was Halloween, and he would use the week-long recess to seek his wayward charge in his new country. He also was to leave alone, because the protections against the Stone needed the other teachers' supervising.

On the evening preceding Halloween, he prepared himself for his many Apparation jumps, leaving Minerva McGonagall, his Deputy Headmistress, in charge. His instincts were telling him to stay, but he had pushed Harry's search away too many times now. Taking his leave of the stern woman, he didn't notice the small rat in a corner of his office.

The next day...

"A troll! There's a troll in the dungeons!"

The shout, coming from the distressed professor Vector, brought panic through the Great Hall. McGonagall immediately restored order through a set of loud bangs, and told the students to stay in the Hall itself, where they would be secure. There was no need to send children to roam a school where a troll was free to wreak havoc. She selected professors Severus Snape, Hogwarts' Potion Master, Filius Flitwick, master of Charms and Duelling Champion, Pomona Sprout, Herbology teacher, as well as Madam Hooch, flying instructor, to investigate the dungeons with her. Hagrid was seldom taking the meals with them, so they couldn't call him quickly, and the other teachers were scheduled to protect the students should the beast cross the massive doors. Turning a last and hopefully reassuring

glance through the closing doors, the five teachers then left for the downward stairs. Unbeknownst to them, professor Quirrell used the panicky atmosphere to leave the Great Hall through the professors' hidden backdoor.

The Defence Against the Dark Arts professor scurried through the corridors, thinking that the five teachers having left to investigate the troll incident were down in the dungeons. He then went directly to the room where the Cerberus was, taking a miniature harp from his pocket. Once in the room, he enlarged it and the charmed instrument started to play a tune. Hagrid had been so kind as to tell him everything about the beast, not thinking about the strangeness of being offered a dragon egg in the process. Once Fluffy slept soundly, Quirrell passed through the trapdoor and used a sunlight spell upon recognizing the devil's snare. He then passed the other trials skilfully, using a Summoning spell to obtain the flying key and the broom to fly over the chessboard. He finally selected the right potion and found himself in the final room.

Only to find that he wasn't alone.

His lack of luck would have it that the teachers that Minerva had selected were part of the defence mechanism around the Stone, and they had immediately seen the possible ruse behind the troll event. They had decided to send one of them to physically guard the stone while the others were actually searching for the troll, and Severus Snape was waiting for him, arms crossed and wand in hand.

The Potion Master smirked.

"So then, it's the stuttering idiot who got the prize. Now that's a surprise. I never thought you could do anything useful, judging by your poor abilities."

"You know, so-sometimes you ha-ave to hide your true nat-nature. Expelliarmus!"

Not expecting the previously shy teacher to begin fighting, Snape was quite surprised and barely had time to sidestep the incoming spell

beam before falling in a duelling stance. He then resumed the interrupted talk.

“I know that already, you worm. Stupefy!”

“Protego!”

Snape dodged his own curse, expecting another one to follow, but Quirrell was looking curiously at the only piece of furniture in the room. The Mirror of Erised, which was standing behind the Potion Master, had been revealed to Quirrell because of Snape's dodging. The mirror, Severus had been told, displayed the inner desires of the people looking right into it. He knew that someone could lose oneself in it and had forbidden himself to even gaze at it. He also knew that Dumbledore had tempered with the Mirror's magic, using it to store the Philosopher's Stone. Quirrell didn't know about all this, though. He was only considering the room and asking himself what to do about this unknown mirror.

“Petrificatus Totalus!” shouted Snape, and Quirrell barely escaped the incoming curse before returning to the duel at hand. After a particularly heated exchange of curses, leaving both wizards panting, a cold voice uttered a few words which made Snape's blood freeze.

“I've had enough of thisss. Release me!”

It wasn't the words themselves, but the tone of voice. Severus Snape knew that voice. It was in his nightmares and in his past, and he had thought that the Potter brat had taken care of it.

When Quirrell finished removing his turban with one hand, the other still aiming his wand on the Potion Master, said Potion Master could only gape at the sight. Sharing Quirrell's head, protruding from the back of it, was a thin head with slit nostrils and pupils. It reminded him of a snake. And of course, it reminded him of his old master. Voldemort.

“Ssssooooo... isn't it our great Ssseverusss Sssnape? The boy I welcomed in my rankss, whom I elevated to my inner sssircle, and who, in thisss time of dire need, turnss his back to me?”

Snape didn't know what to do. On the one hand, he could bow to Voldemort now, taking back his previous life, constantly torn between Dumbledore and Voldemort. On the other hand, he could try to fight the spirit of the Dark Lord. Either way, he would risk his life. Right now, Quirrell may be a stuttering idiot but, with Voldemort at his side, Snape didn't stand a chance.

As if to confirm that, the Dark Lord's spirit spoke a few words in a serpentine language, making Snape's wand arm become painful, as if a red hot poker was pressed on it. On a certain place of it.

On his Dark Mark.

The infamous mark had dimmed after Voldemort's defeat, ten years before, but, due to the spirit's closeness, it was as active as ever. He fell on his knees, clutching his arm, teeth clenched in pain. Ignoring his whimpering ex-servant, Voldemort went to the mirror.

"I guesss that mirror is the lassst trial. No doubt the old fool made it ssso it was difficult although ridiculoussly sssimple. Now let's sssee... I sssee myssself brewing the Elixir of Life, with the Stone, but... where is it?"

After a few minutes of his master's monologue, Quirrell spoke up. "If I may have a look, ma-master?"

"Hmmm... there's a possibility that... hmmm... yesss... come here..."

Hearing the exchange, Severus Snape grew restless. If Dumbledore had been true, Quirrell, looking for the Stone but not wanting to actually use it himself, could obtain the Stone from the Mirror. Shivering in pain, he grasped his fallen wand back, aimed at the approaching Quirrell, and uttered the first spell that came to his mind. The first spell he could think of which could take Quirrell away for an indefinite time, regardless of the cost.

"Avada Kedavra!"

That spell, though, had an incantation longer than most, and Quirrell easily dodged the green beam, uttering a counter-curse on the fly.

“Reducto!”

However, his aim was slightly off because of his dodging, and his Explosion curse landed right on the Mirror.

The three men – well, make it two men and one spirit – glanced at the Mirror in fright, but the charmed item seemed to hold the curse...

...for two seconds.

It then shattered in thousands of shards which cut deep gashes on the two teachers' skins. The Mirror being magical, the shards were, too, and inflicted some body damage to Voldemort's spirit. Not used to physical pain anymore, it howled for a few seconds, before turning toward Quirrell.

“I have had enough of your foolishnesss! I know others ready to welcome me in themsselves. Be ready to ssserve your lord a lassst time. I need your life. Now.”

Quirrell looked at Voldemort with wide eyes, before looking at Snape's unconscious form. The Potion Master had been closer to the Mirror, and the shower of shards had taken him out. It was his last sight, though, as Voldemort uttered a few words in Parseltongue again, and the stuttering professor, who had voluntarily linked himself to the Dark Lord's spirit, felt his life leaving through that very link.

The last words he heard came from Voldemort. “Do not worry about Ssseverussss... I have plansss for him...”
Back in 1989...

Harry looked around, annoyed. Jorg and Gunther had brought them in a house in Hanover suburban area, under the care of a middle-aged woman Jorg introduced as Ulrike, and they were told to wait. It had been a week, and the two men hadn't come back yet. James had recovered from his fever, and Harry had spent the first few days taking aspirin tablets to calm the headache occasioned by learning a

new language so quickly. James had been impressed, though, and Harry had spent a good part of the week teaching him the basics of it. The two of them were quite free to do as they wanted, since, most of the time, the woman was sitting in front of a blaring television, mumbling incoherently to herself.

There was something else of interest in the house. Ulrike visibly had someone living with her before, because there was a large set of electronic parts and books, as well as a strange-looking television standing on a desk. When they tried to turn it on, it didn't display anything. Curious about it, they opened one of the books nearby and, despite the fact that they had to read it in German, they understood that the funny-looking television was linked with the typing machine keyboard in front of it. It was the first computer they ever saw, an old Amstrad CPC6128, and they began to experiment with it. Harry liked the various games, but James, having always liked puzzles and maths, was more interested in the strange-looking constructs described in the chapter 'Programming' of the book. He also tried the many construction games products that could be linked to the computer, and became quite taken with his first attempts in Lego robotics.

After a few more days, Harry grew restless, and began to explore his surroundings, using his expanded senses first, and then walking around the lot. He was alone, though, James spending all his free time with the computer. However, there weren't many activities around, as the nearest mall was miles away. They never had a chance to go there, though, as the woman never left the place despite the comfortable-looking BMW resting in the garage. The food was delivered every few days by a young man who sang listlessly on his walkman's tune. And they were using old clothes Ulrike gave them, merely explaining they came from her now grown children.

It was one of these days, when Harry grew completely fed up. It was raining, a typical November sleet, cold and penetrating, and it was out of question to set a foot outside. His brother was playing with the computingy again, not even a game he could participate in, and the woman was watching her usual TV channels. Harry plopped down in front of the television, and watched the shopping channel anchors displaying the virtues of the "brand new belly fat reducer, call now!"

He looked at Ulrike. How could anyone be able to spend his or her whole life in front of such stupidities? He didn't want to be at her place, and didn't want to know what could be in her head now.

He started at the thought.

Why not?

Remembering the way he had entered Jorg's mind two weeks earlier, he pressed upon the woman's mind and found himself in a desolated landscape, populated with television anchors shouting all around. No wonder Ulrike needed to set the volume so high. He wanted to put his hands to his ears, before remembering where he was and his disincarnate state. Reflecting about it, he concentrated despite the sound, and finally got a bubble of silence around his head. He then explored a bit.

Not only was the landscape more barren than Jorg's mind, not only was it full of people yelling, but there were also fewer blocks of memories. The only ones he could see were relegated at the very border of the mind's territory, as if the woman had tried to forget their content. Suspecting somewhat sad or disturbing memories, Harry didn't approach them, and went in search of something else. Reflecting that he wasn't in a real countryside, and that regular laws of physics didn't apply, he made himself float with a mere thought, in order to see over the sea of yelling people.

In the middle of the barren plain, previously hidden from view, rested a low white block. He approached it, and, to his surprise, found an open door on its white facade, from which more advertising-shouting people came forth, yelling about the merits of a different product each time. Wary of any untoward surprise, Harry slowly entered a darkened room. The only thing giving a little light was a television set spouting shopping advices. His eyes slowly adjusting to the darkened atmosphere, Harry looked around and noticed that there was somebody actually looking at the television screen. It was a younger-looking version of Ulrike, and she was watching the television intently. After a few minutes, the woman pleading the virtues of a thief-proof safe escaped from the TV set and rejoined the other anchors outside.

Harry looked at Ulrike, guessing that it must be the woman's conscience. He concentrated in the same way as before, trying to enter the conscience's mind. He suddenly found himself looking directly at the television, barely grasping the advertisement content because of the woman's cluttered mind. Personally, he didn't like shopping channels at all, and he desperately wanted to watch something else. To his surprise, Ulrike's fingers pressed the buttons of the TV remote controller. He decided to try his control, and willed the woman to stand. She didn't want, though, and he had to fight with all his willpower. He wasn't in his own mind, and the fight was difficult, but he was stubborn as a donkey, and succeeded in making her stand. Feeling the beginning of a headache, he pulled on the link leading him back to his own body, and saw her standing in front of the Discovery Channel, shaking her head in wonder. Harry suddenly feared that she knew about his intrusion, but she only switched the channels back to the shopping one, and sat down.

Despite the headache, Harry was thrilled. If he trained this particular ability, he could push anyone to do anything he wanted. He calmed himself quickly, though. If the secret service agents knew about it, he would never see the sunlight again. He would have to restrict himself to do it only for little things, or only on certain people he was sure of. Petunia's story...

She was having a hard time calming the kids. But she had to, and quick. The events which occurred after exiting the prison had unnerved the twin girls and, to tell the truth, herself, too. They had heard the crowd moving in the town, and their guardians had gone in the opposite direction, thinking that Jorg and Gunther wouldn't meet them in a crowd at all.

However, in the shadows of the umpteenth shadowy street they took, there had been people waiting. They hadn't been waiting for them, but the gunfight which ensued took Steffi off nonetheless. The large woman had thrown Petunia and the children on the ground instead of protecting herself, and had paid for it. Uwe had lasted longer, removing half a dozen enemies from the battle before collapsing. The enemies had then approached, intending to loot the bodies. They had

found a quivering Petunia and the two kids. While their first intent had been to shoot them too, causing fear in the Dursley's mind, they had thought that the three foreigners could serve as hostages. That's why Petunia, while not understanding her captors' language, knew that she had to calm the twins or they would take drastic measures. And she knew she wouldn't like these.

Closing her eyes, and forcing herself to relax, she began to think about her home in England, before the whole travelling extravaganza, and the songs she used to sing to them. Singing them again, she finally succeeded in lulling the two girls into sleep, and she quickly followed, too tired to care about the hard floor.

She was rudely awakened by a sharp kick in the ribs. A man was yelling at her, and she barely understood that she had to take her girls with her as they had to move. On unsteady legs, she was directed to the backseat of a rusty Trabant exhaling dark fumes. Once there, she was given three meagre lumps of spicy bread and a small jar of milk, which she shared with her wide-eyed girls while the car was rolling.

Petunia was on automatic pilot. She didn't have the time nor the luxury to plunge in shock, as her girls were in that state already, and if she couldn't protect them to the best of her abilities, they wouldn't survive. She painfully remembered the Halloween meal they had shared a few days before – she was quite sure that several days had passed since them – and asked herself if she would have another family meal ever again.

She never knew where she was. She hadn't quite learned the names of every little town they passed through, only that they looked foreign to her. In her mind, she could be anywhere between France and China. And she wasn't quite wrong.

On the rather long trip, they changed cars many times, and slept in abandoned houses, sometimes even in the cars themselves. The girls had calmed, and accepted any scanty food they were given with ravenous expressions. Petunia had also taken a bit of time to try to understand the men's language and their nationality and destination.

Quite unsuccessfully. Over the days, she found herself falling asleep in the car more and more often.

After two weeks of uncomfortable travel, she awoke suddenly and found herself in a large bed. She smiled, thinking that the whole episode had been a nightmare, but the vivid light, as well as the sounds she was now hearing weren't a part of her regular neighbourhood. Scents of spice and sounds of the oriental markets were filtering in through a window despite the closed shutters held in place by a solid lock.

She sat and opened her eyes wide, taking her bedroom in. It was quite richly decorated, with intricate golden patterns on white tiles.

"Who are you?"

The voice came from her left and she jumped in surprise, before turned toward the voice, a little afraid. After all, she hadn't seen her daughters yet and wondered about their state.

"I'm sorry?" she stalled.

The man in front of her was clearly Arabic, with a distinguished air which denoted an intellectual. And he seemed to speak English.

"I thought I was clear enough the first time. Who are you?"

"I'm... I'm Petunia Dursley."

He looked at her strangely for several seconds before speaking again. "How do I know it's your real name?"

Petunia was quite shocked that somebody would question her honesty like that, and she didn't have a ready answer for it. "Well... I could tell you it's on all my papers, but I seem to have been robbed of them."

"If that is the case, you have been robbed of them before we took you in."

“About that, sir...?”

“You’ll call me Salim.”

“Thank you, Mr Salim. Can you tell me where my daughters are, and where we are?”

“Your daughters are in the room next to us. Their life depends on your truthfulness.” He smirked at the woman’s sudden intake of breath. “What’s your name?”

“I told you, sir. I’m Petunia, Petunia Dursley. It’s the truth, I swear!”

Salim looked nonplussed at the answer. “Can you tell me what you were doing in East Berlin with two agents of the imperialistic Germany’s secret services?”

Petunia gaped at this. She tried to utter something, but no sound escaped her lips.

The man looked at his impeccable fingernails, and spoke again. “To answer your other question, we are in Istanbul.”

Petunia fainted.

Salim looked at her with barely concealed disgust before calling a henchman in. “This woman doesn’t seem dangerous. Settle the kids here; we’ll keep them for the moment.”

Hanover, December 1989...

The two men hadn’t returned to check on Harry and James. James had made great progress in his use of the computer, and several of his robots were seen walking around the computer on the cluttered desk. Harry had trained his mind control ability a bit more, getting less and less headaches and being more and more efficient in his orders. Beside making Ulrike highly compliant to his verbal requests, he had also explored her memories, and had discovered that she was in fact Jorg’s mother. The computer and other machinery was his, and she didn’t know anything about her son’s job as a spy. Her husband had

been a spy too, and Harry had discovered that the man had died many years ago, while on mission.

While directing the woman around, he also found out that he could plant instructions for her to execute while he wasn't in actual control of her. When he thought about that, he reflected that it resembled his brother's programs a little. He was going to talk to him about it, when a ringing sound erupted in the house.

Harry jumped in surprise, as nobody had ever called since their arrival. He hadn't even known that there was a phone there. The woman wasn't moving either, still watching the television, although Harry had made it so that she was now watching the animal life rather than the shopping channels, and with a lowered sound. The phone was continuing to ring, and Harry decided that he had to make Ulrike pick up the phone because nobody was to know he and his brother were there. He entered her mind, and she picked the phone.

"Hallo?"

"Mum?" it was Jorg's voice, speaking German, of course.

"Yes?" Harry answered through the woman.

A silence ensued, as if Jorg was trying to understand how his mother could answer the phone. He didn't reflect long, though.

"Pass me Harry."

Harry left the woman's mind and took the phone.

"Yes?"

"Harry, I want you to leave the house. My position has been compromised and I can't help you. Because of the Wall's fall, there are enemies all around, and they know my... the house. Take Ulrike with you, please, and leave her in the nearest hospital. Tell her... tell her I'm sorry."

Jorg seemed to hesitate in his words, and Harry, understanding about the man's strained relationship with his mother, merely answered "Okay."

"Wait! There is some money for you to take a cab and then the train back to France. It's in the pot labelled 'Spice' on the highest shelf in the kitchen." A pause. "I have to inform you, though, that Steffi and Uwe have been found dead in East Berlin. They didn't make it, Harry."

Harry's entrails went cold at the news, and he didn't answer for a long time.

"Harry?" enquired Jorg. "Are you still there?"

"Yeah... yes, Jorg. I'm here. What about... my family?"

"We don't know, son. No trace whatsoever."

"Are they held somewhere?"

"I explored the agency's files as discreetly as I could, and I found that Steffi and Uwe had been killed right in front of a house belonging to the Turkish secret services. I'm sorry."

A longer pause, during which Harry reflected quickly.

"Jorg?"

"Yes?"

"Is it possible that they are being held hostage somewhere?"

"Well, it's a possibility, boy, but I'd advice you not to count on it."

"Where would they be held if that was the case?"

"Harry, you aren't serious!"

Harry didn't care anymore. He had drafted a plan, and he was going to build on it, whatever the danger. In no way was he returning to his father without his mother. He heard several scuffle sounds in his phone.

"Jorg, I need to know. Where, please?"

"Harry, I have to go, now. I've been found."

"WHERE?" Harry's tone was desperate.

A very short pause.

"Istanbul. Good luck, Harry."

Click.

"You too, Jorg." answered Harry to the lifeless phone.

He reworked the first steps of his plan in his mind, before hanging up, yelling. "JAMIE! Prepare our stuff! We're leaving!"

He heard a vehement protest coming from upstairs. His brother was certainly in the middle of building a new robot. They didn't have time, though. Harry ran up the stairs and, panting, addressed his brother, recounting the discussion he had just had with Jorg. James went white, but Harry, orienting the talk to another topic, suggested that he could take a few of the books around them. That softened the blow on his brother, and he packed quickly.

Harry selected three travelling bags from Jorg's room closets, one for each of them. These bags could also be used as backpacks through ingenious removable straps. While taking them out, he accidentally kicked the wall and a tile fell off its base. He bent and, searching with his hand, found and extracted a flat box covered in black leather, and some cobwebs. He carefully opened it, and gaped at the sight. A sleek Walther P88 rested in the red interior, beside no less than 6 spare magazines. Harry slammed the lid in shock, but the weapon integrated itself in his plan easily and, after cleaning the cobwebs and

replacing the loose tile, he stowed the box in one of the bags, which would then be his.

James started to put every book in the bag but Harry, by making him try to lift the bag, convinced him of the usefulness of choosing only a few. Harry then grasped the third bag and, after calling for Ulrike to join him in her room, he suggested she packed several days' worth of change.

After packing everything, as well as some toiletries, they headed downstairs. After sending Ulrike to stow the bags in the car's trunk and open the garage door, as well as talking James into reading one of his books in the BMW backseat, Harry took the 'Spice' container in the kitchen, and extracted a wallet with a couple dozen notes in it. Glancing at their individual value and making the total, he gasped. There were almost 15000 Deutsch Marks in there, enough to buy a small car. He calmed his heartbeat and, silently thanking Jorg, he stowed the wallet in the small travel bag he had also selected. He finally selected a road map of Germany and a world Atlas from the bookcase, and they joined the wallet in the bag.

Harry looked around for the last time, before heading for the car's backseat too. Warning James that he wasn't to be disturbed from his slumber, he took complete control of Ulrike and verified from her memory that he hadn't forgotten anything. Of course, he made her go back inside to grasp the car keys, as well as her own wallet with her credit card, even if he didn't know if it worked at all. She then took the wheel, Harry releasing a bit of control so that she could drive, and they left the house, the garage door closing automatically after them.

Harry, having learnt from low-rated action movies that the credit cards could be traced or blocked, wanted to make a good use of it while it was still useable. He then made her first stop at her bank, and she went to the young teller there, whose badge showed 'Ernst Kunstler, Junior Accountant'.

"Good day, Madam. What can I do for you?"

"Good day, sir. I'd like a statement of my account, and I'll make a withdrawal afterwards."

“Very well. Do you have your account number?”

She handed him her credit card and passport, and Ernst smiled. Of course, the cards and accounts were linked, and he quickly found her account, double-checking her identity with the passport.

“Mrs Grunberg, you have a regular account with 25719 Marks on it, as well as a life insurance account, with your son Jorg as beneficiary. You can draw as much as 2000 Marks from that account, but a percentage fee of 3 percent will be added for the account management.”

Harry/Ulrike stayed silent, processing the information, before speaking again. “How much can I draw from my regular account? I have to visit my son, you see.” Harry lied on the spot. “He’s in a hospital in Albania, and they accept currency before everything else.”

“You can draw as much as you want, but for withdrawals larger than 10000 Marks, we have to process the request to our headquarters and it takes a full day.”

Ulrike looked distressed. “Are you sure I can’t take more? I really have to go today.”

The man looked uneasily around him. Lowering his voice, he addressed the sweet old lady. “I can make it so that you draw that amount twice. I’ll just pass the second paper tomorrow.”

“Thank you, young man, you are most kind. I will do that, then. 20000 from the regular account, and 2000 from the other one. And... can you make it so that it isn’t too large notes? Hundreds, maybe? I’m not used to large banknotes.”

“Of course.” It took fifteen minutes for Ernst to gather the necessary notes but, when finished, he provided a complimentary bag for transport and thanked her for her business.

Back in the car, she drove to the local mall and parked in the underground lot. Once there, she transferred the money from the

complimentary bag to Harry's travel bag, only keeping a few notes in her wallet. She also took a 1000 DM note. In the mall, where she went alone, she threw the banker's complimentary money bag in a trashcan, and then bought a few missing items: sunglasses, protection creams, useful tablets like aspirin, some clothes, as well as detailed road maps from the countries they were going to go through: Austria, Romania, and Bulgaria. When she paid with the largest note, the cashier made a face, but gave her the change anyway.

Unbeknownst to them, at the same moment, three persons were breaking in Ulrike's house. The three people found nothing of real value and, thinking that they were gone shopping, waited for their return. They would wait for a long time until the food delivery teen rang in. After questioning him, they would understand that the woman would never leave the house, and that they had been had.

At the mall, the three fugitives refilled the car's tank, and finally left the town southward. Harry had drawn an approximate route, and they had quite a few countries to cross before arriving to their destination. They would also have quite a few other countries to traverse afterwards too, on their way back. Jamie was still in his books.

Surprisingly, Harry found that Ulrike's original conscience, while still unable to decide by herself on the direction to follow, was quite happy at the change of scenery.

After a week of driving through secondary roads, though, they were all exhausted. Ulrike from driving, James from reading, and Harry from planning the road and directing Ulrike. They finally arrived to the last frontier on a Thursday morning, and Harry slowly extracted himself from Ulrike's mind to concentrate at the man who had just addressed them in a foreign language. Quickly entering his mind, he acquired the language in the same way he had done with Jorg and the other custom officers in the way, gaining another headache in the process. They were in Turkey, now, and he also learnt the popular customs from the still waiting officer's mind. Harry returned to his own body and addressed the man in perfect Turkish.

"We are here to rejoin our dad. He's cab driver in Istanbul. Our mother is dead and this is our Grandmother. She doesn't speak

Turkish, though, nor does my brother because he was too young when dad left.”

The guard looked impressed that the occidental-looking boy in the classy although dusty car was able to speak Turkish that fluently. He gave the boy a nod, before asking “What’s his name?”

Harry blinked. “What?”

“You father’s name. For the records.”

Harry sighed. He didn’t want to be sought after if he gave a wrong name. He painfully entered the man’s mind and planted information there so that the man would let them pass without filling the log.

He then let Ulrike drive by herself until they arrived in Istanbul, three hours afterwards. They quickly found a hotel in the tourist-laden town, and handed the car to a well-tipped valet for cleaning and parking. At the check-in register of The President Hotel, they took two adjoining rooms and paid for a week and the corresponding meals with three 1000 DM notes. They then went to their rooms and, after locking the door, slept soundly for the first time since they had left the house. Meanwhile, in Monaco’s hospital...

“Agent Jones?”

The voice, even through the low quality phone lines, had a cold edge in it, something which didn’t sound good.

“Yes?”

“Your... charge. He had reappeared.”

Agent Jones had only one such ‘charge’ and it wasn’t Vernon Dursley, despite his presence at the man’s hospital bed. He stood up suddenly and started to pace while still speaking in the phone.

“Where?”

“Which towns do you know with a constant radio frequency monitoring?”

Jones thought hard, but there were so many of them that he was still clueless. When he admitted this, the other man smirked. It was almost audible in his way of speaking.

“I guess I’ll see you there soon. He’s in Istanbul.”

“Ist-” began Jones, before remembering the insecure environment he was in. Moreover, the other man had hung up. Putting the receiver back on the cradle, he cast a glance at the prone form of Dursley. The man, recovering from his leg wound, looked up at him questioningly.

“Was it about my family?”

“No, Dursley.” the man lied. “But I have to leave now. I’ll leave a guard at your door, though.”

And agent Jones left the room, the Hospital, and the city, in order to catch the first plane eastwards.

Let’s have a look at what happens two years afterwards...

Albus Dumbledore was cursed.

At least, that was what the great man was telling himself, as he hadn’t been that unlucky since his first year as a student. That had been when the Headmaster of the time, Phineas Nigellus, was also teaching Potions. A mishap in the class caused Albus’ hands to be covered in the bluish goo, and later switch randomly between sticky to slippery and back at the most inappropriate moments. Smirking, the Headmaster had forbidden him to access the Hospital wing ‘because he was not wounded’ and Albus had been forced to live in that state until school break, three weeks later. Thankfully, that had been Nigellus’ last year as Headmaster, as he was assassinated in the summer by some member of his own family wanting the power his position granted.

That was then, though, and now was now. Albus sighed. He had left the castle on this fateful Halloween 1991, leaving the school in Minerva's good care, and had gone on a quest for information. Once in America, he waltzed through the 'Incoming Wizard Procedure' and began to search for any signs of Harry Potter. He got no sign of the boy in the local archives, nor in the magical events file, which stored every registered wizard or witch's use of magic.

Of course, finally thought Albus after a day's worth of work. The boy wasn't registered there at all. After that initial failure, he followed his primary lead and went to the local Muggle relationship office. The office had a magically-updated folder for any muggle entering, living, or exiting the American territory, and Albus Dumbledore asked several debts repayment to access these files in search of any signs of the Dursleys.

"Ah-ha!" he yelled, unconcerned about the people around him. He had just found the right folder. Opening it, though, he was quite shocked to see that it contained only one sheet. And a small one at that.

Vernon Dursley (factory manager) & Petunia Evans (housewife)

4 children

Arrival: July 1987 – from England

Departure: August 1988 – to China

"Is that all?" asked the very annoyed wizard to the younger one.

The other one, younger despite being over the century himself, huffed at the tone.

"Sure that's all. They came, and they left. When they leave, most of the record is wiped out. We just keep the bare minimum. It would be too complicated otherwise."

They started to walk out of the office.

"Yes, yes. I understand. Well... thank you, Jack. I'll be sure to repay your kindness when you come over to visit Hogwarts someday."

“Aye, Albus. I’ll think about that. Greet Aberforth for me, will ya?”

“I will do that.”

The wizards parted ways at the building entrance, and Albus headed straight for the Apparation point. The search had lasted two days already, and had mostly failed. Only one lead subsisted, and it was a strained one. The relationship with the American wizards had been easy, but the Chinese...

Albus shuddered, remembering a meeting with one of the Chinese elders, more than a century ago, when he himself was a young man working at the Ministry. He had helplessly listened to the old man’s words.

“You British wizards think so high of yourself that you don’t hesitate to call your country the "Wizarding World". Know that there are countries that don’t accept that. In his eternal wisdom, our Emperor has deemed diplomatic relationships with you unnecessary, whether it is in war or peace. So mote it be.”

With these words in head, Albus arrived in Hogwarts, only to be greeted by silence. Nobody was on the grounds or in the corridors. Unnerved by the eerie feeling, he headed straight for his office to recover the magical amulet which would reconnect him to the castle. It was the man’s best-kept secret. He had found the item when he took the Headmaster position. Before that, he had always been annoyed of searching after missing students all the time. It was a medallion which was attuned to the castle and which allowed him to see the content of most of the castle’s public places and to locate anyone unerringly, and which also warned him if anything unusual happened. He smirked. Everybody had always wanted to know how he knew everything going on in Hogwarts, and they had all assumed it was his Headmaster position. The necklace couldn’t function outside the building, though, and it was even painful to wear the farther he went from the school.

Putting the pendant on, and concentrating, he found out that the students were relegated in their respective dorms under the watchful guard of their respective House ghost. The teachers, minus Quirrell,

were in the Hospital Wing, around a bed where Snape was sleeping. There were few reasons for students to be stranded and a teacher to be in the infirmary. A quick glance in the appropriate rooms told him that his plans had somewhat failed. The Mirror was in pieces, and the Stone had disappeared with it. He sighed. How would he inform his old friend and mentor about his failure? Losing the Stone was akin to writing a death warrant for Nicholas Flamel. The well-known alchemist and his wife had lived more than six centuries thanks to the Stone and the resulting Elixir of Life, and they won't be pleased to know about its destruction.

Shaking himself awake, he went to Madam Pomfrey's domain to learn more about the events that had occurred while he had disobeyed his instincts, leaving the castle for a mere couple of days.

To be continued in next chapter: The Wars we Wage...

The Hunt will now switch into
An oriental setting.

You know I like reviews, too
So, write one, please. Something.

Chapter 5 – The Wars we Wage

posted June 27th, 2005

On his third night there, Harry woke up, panting and drenched in sweat. The sun hadn't risen yet, and the bedside clock glowed discreetly. 5:47am. He had had his nightmares for a long time, now, and was quite tired of them. He couldn't even remember when they had started. However, he couldn't do anything about them, could he?

He stretched and, walking to the room's kitchenette to grasp an orange juice, reflected about it. If he was able to enter others' minds, was it possible to enter his own?

After sipping the refreshing juice, he returned to his bed and sat on it, having reached a conclusion: he wouldn't know if he didn't try. Concentrating on himself, he pictured his mind and, after a time adapting his mental schemes to act on his own mind, found himself in the usual landscape. Except that it wasn't as desolated as Ulrike's.

Not at all.

He had many memories scattered across the landscape and he shuddered at their number. Some of them were isolated while others were linked together in a seemingly random pattern. The complexity of the whole thing made him wary of exploring more, afraid that he would break something. After all, he was in his own mind, and he didn't want to break something and find himself stranded there.

Levitating himself to grasp the thing as a whole, he found the usual white building in the middle, as well as the language blocks he had imported from Jorg and the custom officers on his way here, all connected to his own, but something else caught his eye. Several things in fact. Firstly, there was a large silo near the white building hosting his conscious mind, and it was radiating heat. A strangely comforting heat. Because he hadn't seen it in the others' mind, Harry supposed that it was related to his magic. The second unexplainable thing was a dark shroud in the farthest corner of the landscape, hiding something from view. It was black, and Harry knew, without explaining how, that it was alive. And evil. And linked to his nightmares.

He didn't want to explore there, though. Nobody could help him if he did something wrong. However, he could perhaps separate the shrouded part from his normal mind.

Perhaps, he could build a wall around the shrouded part.

Or around the rest of his mind.

Or both.

Perhaps...

To his surprise, a mound of bricks appeared from nowhere, right in front of him, levitating in mid-air beside a cement machine and building tools, like the ones he had seen in several construction sites. He took one of the bricks and weighed it in his hand, thinking hard. In no way would he be able to build the wall himself, as it would take him years. However, he could do something else.

He carefully released the brick in mid-air, concentrating on it. The brick stayed where it was, not falling down. He smiled, and mentally directed the brick towards the other ones. He found that directing the thing with his hands was helping, easing a bit of concentration.

He went straight to the shrouded part of his mind, and stopped a few yards from it. If he was to do something, better start there. He gently lowered the bricks mound on the ground, followed by the cement machine and tools. Needing space, he also uprooted the memories that were there and slowly relocated them a few yards away from the shroud, keeping the connections between the memories. Once a reasonable expanse of bare terrain was freed, he started to direct the bricks around when an unbidden thought hit him. Weren't stones sturdier? The moment the thought came, the mound of bricks transformed into a mound of stones. Satisfied, he began to build a wall between the shroud and his mind.

A few hours afterwards, he felt that someone was trying to reach him, and listened to his external senses.

“...up, Harry! Wake up! It’s 10 already and we haven’t eaten yet!”

10? 10am? Wow. Harry looked at his work and, satisfied about the 10-foot high and 20-yard long wall, decided to make a pause. He could complete it later. Besides, he had a job to do here, and he hadn’t finished visiting the town. His nightmares could wait.

He pulled at the tendril bringing him back to his body and, once there, opened his eyes to see a frantic James.

“Hey.” he said.

“Harry! Ulrike’s not there, and I’m hungry.”

“Not there? She left?” Harry was flabbergasted. How could she leave by herself when she hadn’t had the least bit of will in the previous weeks? On top of that, he couldn’t help feeling guilty that something could happen to her. And he needed her to drive the car. He could do it, but he would be arrested for underage driving.

He sat up, and closed his eyes, opening his awareness to the surroundings. And felt two things.

“She’s in the hotel lobby. Let’s go.” he said grimly.

He was observed.
Same time, another building...

“They exit the bedroom.”

“Alpha team, follow them.”

“Roger.”

A silence.

“Lobby. They found the woman. They talk. Primary target draw her out.”

“Zephyr.”

“On position, HQ.”

A short silence.

“They leave on foot.”

“Follow.”

A long pause.

“They enter the market. Can’t follow.”

“I don’t care! Park anywhere and follow on foot.”

“Roger.”

A short pause.

“And don’t forget your radio!”

No answer.

“Damn!” yelled Jones, slamming his microphone on the Formica table.
“I’m surrounded by imbeciles!”

An hour afterwards, in Istanbul market...

Dylan Peterson, the American agent whose cover was taxi driver, was sweating. Having been brought by Jones two days earlier, he wasn’t used to the local temperatures which, even in winter, were higher than those of his hometown. The sweat was also caused by his current difficulties at trailing the boy, which had also prevented a return in the taxi to fetch his radio. That had been one hour ago, and he didn’t want to return yet, intent on grasping the elusive boy. However, said boy had disappeared in a shop minutes ago, as well as the woman and the little one. He had waited outside, browsing the shop’s outside selection, when a thought struck him. A classical one, especially in his profession. What if the shop had more than one entrance?

He rushed inside, only to find he was true. Cursing his lack of luck, he exited the shop through the back door and found himself in an empty street.

Not quite empty, though, as several men were quietly discussing nearby. He approached them, and asked if they had seen the fugitives, but they shook their head before resuming their chat. He didn't know if they hadn't seen them or if they hadn't understood him, and went to ask again, when he felt a distinctive object pushing in his back.

"Who arr yoo?" asked a stern voice.

Dylan kicked himself. How could he be stupid to the point of entering an unknown zone without backup? He raised his arms, before noticing that several Turkish policemen were entering the street. Seeing his escape, he tried to make himself more visible by slowly stepping towards the middle of the street. The next thing he knew, something hit him in the neck, and darkness engulfed him.

He woke up with a start, as the bucket of water, now empty, clanked on the brick floor beside him. He blinked, and tried to stand when a shove brought him on his knees.

"Who are you and who do you work for?" asked a man in front of him, absently playing with Dylan's gun.

"I'm..." he swallowed with difficulty, before remembering the procedure. "I'm an American citizen! You have no right to detain me! If you..."

The Glock's handle interrupted his vehement and desperate-looking speech by smacking in his jaw, breaking a tooth or three in the process. The man in front of him was standing, now, and visibly seething.

"No American citizen dares walking our streets with this kind of weapon on them!" He sat again, surprisingly calm again. "As you said you were one, though, it leaves me a few choices only." He smirked,

and loaded the first bullet in the chamber expertly. “Fewer choices than you have limbs. And more bullets.”

Dylan began to sweat. Despite his training, he hadn’t been prepared to face torture, and didn’t know what he could do.

Imperturbable, the man aimed, and asked “Are you from the CIA?”

“No, but...”

BAM!

Dylan clutched his bleeding left forearm, gasping for breath and trying not to faint from the pain. The gun was making much damage and the point-blank range ensured his torturer’s accuracy. He was sure that both his forearm bones were shattered as well.

“Are you from the NSA?”

No answer.

BAM!

“I asked you a question! Are you from the NSA?” asked the unknown man, in the same voice he would use in a friendly tea party.

“I’m not. I’m...”

BAM!

“Are you from the FBI?”

“Damn it, man! I’m not working fo...”

BAM!

Dylan was now painfully sitting on the floor, left arm and leg broken in several places, fighting for consciousness. He really didn’t want to die here and now.

The Turk approached, and placed the still-hot gun muzzle on his forehead. "Who do you work for?" he whispered.

Dylan was in pain, and only one answer would appease them. "CIA."

"Good! Very good! You see, when you want? There's nothing to fear from me, really." The man smiled genially. "We'll take good care of your wounds, but I want other answers first." he said, becoming serious again. "Firstly, your name."

"Dylan Peterson."

The Arab nodded slowly, writing it down. He then asked his address in the States, the current plans of the CIA, and the reason behind him being caught armed near the central Market. Dylan didn't know everything, but he told him that they had to watch over a boy. A certain Harry Dursley.

The family name immediately rang something in the other man's mind. The man whose parents named Muhammad Rahiad Ibn Sayel Al-Fahid, and who was more known under the name of Salim, exited the room suddenly. Dylan didn't have enough energy to call after him, and collapsed on the floor, bathing in his own blood. A few streets nearby...

Harry knew that he had lost his pursuer, but something told him to go back in the market. While using his senses to know where the CIA agent was, he had caught a familiar presence.

Petunia.

As it was the main reason for his presence in Istanbul, he dragged James and Ulrike back in the crowded market again. The throng was making the search difficult, though, and he found the lead again only after an hour. It wasn't a true presence, though. He focussed on it and found that he caught a residual presence instead. As if his mother had spent a long time in a place, but wasn't there anymore. Still, it was as good a lead as one can be, and he pressed on.

He wasn't prepared to what he would find, though.
A bit before...

The disguised commando arrived in sight of the target building. One of them was prisoner there, and they were to free him. The leader motioned his men onwards, and they advanced. They arrived in the back of the old tower, and started to walk around it, preparing themselves to shoot. The crossbow wasn't a weapon as effective as the handgun, but it was useful nonetheless. Especially as it was almost silent.

They took out the three guards quite easily, and hid their bodies before entering the building. There, they first reloaded their weapons, and then, using the memorized map, they went straight for the underground levels where the prison cells were. On their way, they succeeded in killing silently another trio of guards.

They advanced stealthily, glancing in the mostly empty cells, until they heard an exchange of voice. It was in a foreign language they didn't know, and they advanced with even more caution. When the commando leader peered inside, though, he gasped. Each and every man of his commando knew the man there.

Every Kurd knew the Butcher of Diyarbekir. And the whole commando was Kurd.

The Butcher was speaking in an unknown language with four other persons. The first, an occidental-looking man, was chained to the wall, and bleeding from several wounds. The others weren't chained, but their submissive attitude told the leader that they were as much prisoners as the man. The Butcher, also known as Salim, was yelling at the chained man, pointing his weapon at the woman, who cringed, while the two little girls clutched her, crying.

Using hand movements, the commando leader informed his men of the situation, and they positioned themselves around the half-closed door. When the leader kicked at the door, it surprised Salim. The Turk didn't have enough time to react as six crossbow bolts flew his way. One of them was off, but the others impaled the man and stuck him to the plaster wall behind him by the arms and legs. The fifth bolt had

gone through the man's stomach, and the commando leader smirked. The Butcher was going to die a long and painful death.

After gagging Salim and telling his men to find their target in the remaining cells, he grasped the fallen gun, which he looked at intently. The Butcher wasn't known to use handguns, and even if he had, it wouldn't have been a Glock. It must belong to someone else. He then looked around. The woman was looking at him, eyes wide in fear while clutching the girls protectively, hiding the hideous scene from them. Obviously, she was someone important for the Turks if the Butcher was using her. He reflected about the scene intently. Because of his wounds, he couldn't take the bleeding man with them, but the woman was able to walk. Her daughters would slow her, though. He looked at the two girls and got another surprise. They were identical twins! He had a superstition about twins, and didn't want to incur the wrath of his God by separating them from their mother.

His men returned with sad news: the man they had come to deliver was dead, visibly tortured. He looked at Salim with a murderous look, but caught sight of the woman. Telling his men to take her and the girls out, he unsheathed his knife and approached the now frightened Butcher.

One hour afterwards, they were driving eastwards in a rusty van, and Petunia Dursley was asking herself if her tribulations would stop one day.

In the bloodied cell, some time after the Kurds' departure...

Harry extracted himself from the man's mind, shuddering. The man in front of him, who was known by many names, had committed more murders than anybody he knew, and these weren't clean ones.

However, he had had the information Harry wanted. Taking a pill from the aspirin bottle which never left his pocket nowadays, Harry calmed himself and rejoined James and Ulrike outside, with a great lump of confidential information in his mind, as well as a new target.

Petunia and the twins were detained by the Kurds, now.

He decided to go back to the hotel despite the returning sensation of being observed. He didn't have any choice about it, because all their belongings were in their rooms. However, he succeeded in avoiding most of the agents in the way, seemingly innocently. In the lobby, he bought a road map of the whole country, including the easternmost Kurdistan. When they entered their rooms, he got another surprise. Despite the immaculate state, he felt that someone had come in and had touched their luggage. Not noticing anything missing, not even his gun, he suspected that something had been done to track them. It reminded him of the device in his leg, but he didn't have time to check about that now. He took some time, though, to check if the intruder had touched to their money bag, which had been hidden in the room's safe. Either they hadn't opened the safe or they had replaced everything afterwards. The separate folders were still containing the same amount of notes. One with the usual Deutsch Marks, one with American dollars, and one with Turkish Liras. The amount wasn't the same in the three currencies, but it represented the same value. To be able to change the money discreetly, they had spent a few hours each day to visit several banks around their location.

After gathering their possessions, they headed for the valet office and picked up their car, with the tank full and the dust gone. With Harry directing Ulrike using the town's map he had extracted from one of the valets' mind, they left the place toward the harbour. Waiting for the larger shuttle to pick them up with their car, Harry felt several agents entering the vicinity. Two were walking around, seeming in a deep conversation, and four were in a car, waiting in the shuttle line two cars behind them. Harry decided to do something as unobtrusive as possible about it, and planted a thought in the mind of the driver following them, so that he would want to turn back around.

When the shuttle arrived, after unloading its content, the cars started to advance and, as if on cue, the man behind them started the difficult manoeuvre of turning around in the one-way path. The other cars behind them horned angrily, but it was of no use and Harry noticed with a smirk that the agents began to panic as the shuttle doors began to close. The two agents on foot abandoned all pretence and ran to the boat, while the men in the car tried to extract themselves to

do the same. Only one of those four succeeded in joining the two others on the boat before it left the pier.

They were three and, during the trip, Harry went to each of them and updated their memories so that they would return with the next shuttle, thinking they had lost him. It took the whole trip's time to do so and, once they left the boat, they drove eastwards, only stopping to fill the tank, buy food, or sleep. As they left the town proper, when Ulrike was tired, Harry was taking the wheel for some time, having learnt to drive the same way he had learnt to speak German: importing Ulrike's memories.

While Harry was fleeing the town towards the Kurdistan with James and Ulrike...

...agent Jones was seething.

"How could you lose him? You were on the same boat! You should have seen him getting out of it!"

The three low-ranking agents looked meekly at their feet. They knew that their rank was going to shift even lower, especially as they didn't have a valid answer to their superior's question.

Jones was pacing. He had to find this unexplainable boy, and he had to find him quick. He could fly there and start searching manually, as the fugitives' trackers had escaped the CIA's coverage of Istanbul eastwards. He could...

He stopped, as a thought caught him off guard.

He could use the brand-new military satellite. It wasn't very efficient, only tracing signals with a 10-mile radius zone of imprecision, but it would tell them where to start their research.

Smiling, and completely forgetting the three anxiously waiting agents, he exited the room to get a secured international phone line, intent on finding the satellite services boss.

Three hours afterwards, he was back in his office, fuming and mumbling to himself.

“Christmas! Damn those family men! Gone for weeks! Can’t access it! Damn!” he finished, slamming his fist on the table. Said table was already broken, because of another of Jones’ temper tantrums, and the hit was enough to break it again. Jones looked, confused but still angry, as his piles of carefully-stacked folders went to the ground in disordered mounds.

“DAMN!”

A month and a half later...

It took a long time for Harry to feel Petunia’s presence again. During that time, he inquired about her, the twins, and their captors, but nobody knew anything in the few towns and many settlements in the way. They went through Diyarbekir, of course, Harry having extracted the location from Salim’s mind, and headed south-eastward from there, but not crossing any frontier yet. Each of them had also bought small presents and offered them to each other in a make-believe Christmas’ spirit. Harry had offered a silken shawl to Ulrike and a book on mathematical puzzles for children to his brother. From them, he had gotten a bottle of strawberry-flavoured liquid aspirin and a tee-shirt from a local football team, respectively. Ulrike and James had also exchanged a soccer ball and a small make-up kit. Despite the uneasiness of doing it in a hotel room, they had thanked each other and enjoyed it.

Harry knew about the country’s traditions, and understood that people were reluctant to speak freely to unknown women and children, whereas a man, preferably old and Turkish himself, would have no problem speaking with the people they encountered. To ease the discussions, Harry had then “kidnapped” such a man, named Mustafa Sulayya, after a few days. Of course, he double-checked that the man didn’t have anything else to do, and that he had no family that would miss him. The quest for information was then quickened, the man being able to enter the cafés where men debated about everything. It was still fruitless, though.

During that time, Ulrike was faring better and better by herself, content in exploring the country, and offering gentle advice at

surprising times. James, however, had finished reading his few books, and had grown bored of travelling in the mostly desolated countryside. Harry had used his reprieve in concentration thanks to Ulrike's newfound independence, and discussed with James, finding that they could talk about programming quite easily despite Harry's thoughts being directed about programming people's minds rather than computers. Since that time, James' boredom eased a bit. Besides, they had often paused in hamlets where the local kids readily included them in their football teams.

After six weeks of searching, sweeping through the towns and following every little lead unsuccessfully, they arrived in the suburban area of Heraki, one of the largest towns in the Kurd south-easternmost part of Turkey, situated in a mountain range 4000 yards high. The small house from which the residual 'scent' of Petunia and the twins came from was bolted shut, though, and Harry's senses perceived nobody inside, either alive or dead.

Taking control of the old man who was travelling with them, Harry sent him to the local café to discreetly enquire about the house inhabitants. As usual, they didn't know anything, but one of the men seemed very eager to finish his drink and to leave afterwards. Releasing his hold on Mustafa, who then politely participated in the current debate, Harry used his senses to locate the fleeing man and projected himself into his mind.

Like in Salim's mind, although on a smaller scale, he found several bits of interesting information, relative to secret services, although in the case of this man, it was belonging to the Kurdistan's underground government. He saw that, despite the Kurds' pleas to the other nations since 1919, they still didn't have a separate country, and an underground political body had been set up to organize the Kurds against the neighbouring countries. The man himself was a low-key agent of that government's secret police, posted there uniquely to report whenever anyone would inquire about them.

And the man was on his way to do exactly that, reporting.

Seizing the man's consciousness, Harry forced him to stop and turn around, and arranged his memories so that he forgot about Mustafa's

questions and his report. When he left the man's mind afterwards, said man shook his head and returned to the café, not remembering why he had left. Meanwhile, Mustafa had returned to the car, and the dusty BMW, which the other three occupants hadn't left during the whole episode, had departed already.

The Kurdistan was a large pseudo-country, which encompassed several countries, and the person the man had wanted to report to, named Ibrahim Al-Sidahar, worked and lived in Irbil, in the Iraqi part of the Kurdistan. If he was there, chances were that Petunia was, too. Before leaving the relatively large town, Ulrike filled the tank once more, they bought food and other necessities, and they found a bank where they could exchange a bit of Turkish Liras for Iraqi Dinars. Afterwards, they left the town, this time heading southwards.

That was when Harry felt observed again, although distantly. Very distantly. And, when he concentrated on the feeling, it came from the sky.

At the exact same moment, on the other side of the world...

"At last!" shouted Jones.

The three others cringed. Agent Jones was known for being hot-tempered, and his recent failures had fuelled the man's anger.

Each of the three assistants was positioned at a console, and Jones was looking at a large screen displaying a small part of the Earth. The display was slowly zooming forwards, sometimes interrupted by static, as it was the view from the satellite they were currently using, and the winter storm raging outside wasn't helping the connection.

When they successfully narrowed the signal to the maximum, they found that it was in the region between Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. They couldn't get a more detailed view, but they knew something: the target was moving.

Jones barked orders to obtain a printout, and left to inform his director. He calmed himself on the way, as the director wasn't one to be impressed by his angry bursts, quite the contrary. Jones thought that,

if he presented his case in a proper way, he could obtain a commando operation quickly.

“Good afternoon, Jones.” said the old man with the expensive-looking black suit.

“Good afternoon, sir.” answered Jones humbly.

The director positioned himself comfortably, waiting for Jones to expose his case.

“Hmmm... you know about the mission I have been given?”

“You mean the mission which failed to give any result since it began 4 years ago?” asked the man in a no-nonsense tone.

Jones gulped. It was going to be harder than he envisioned.

“About that, sir, our target fled Istanbul weeks ago, and we just got his signal in the Kurdistan.”

The old man blinked. Twice. “May I ask how you got his signal?”

Agent Jones suffered from a sudden cold sweat. “Err... we got the opportunity to use one of our satellites which was hovering in the proper zone, sir.”

“And...?”

“And? Sir?”

“And, what are you going to ask the Agency this time, Jones? A military operation? A suicide mission? A diplomatic agreement?”

At that point, Jones knew that whatever he would ask now would be rejected. Plain and simple, and no explanation given. He tried, though.

“I’d like to fetch him, sir. He’s really important. Perhaps, if I could be accompanied with a Marines team...”

“No.”

A disappointed pause.

“No, sir?”

“You heard me the first time, Jones. The Agency has other priorities for the current allotment it had been given, and sending a Marine commando to fetch a boy isn’t one of them, particularly in that area. Our soldiers are mainly American patriots, and have only limited knowledge of the area’s climate, terrain, and population. Have you thought about the diplomatic repercussions should the commando be found out?”

Jones was speechless. Of course, he hadn’t thought about that. He had pushed his mission without thinking of the consequences, as usual. It was at these moments that he understood why he would never outgrow his current status of terrain agent. He mumbled an apology and started to withdraw, but the director wasn’t finished with him.

“Besides, the boy isn’t even American, so he can’t be recovered using the "stranded American citizen" procedure. The area itself is quite dangerous, too, as all the nations around that point are belligerent toward each other. If your target was to leave, perhaps we could do something. As it is, you won’t try anything. However, as you seem quite taken by your mission, you’ll be monitoring the target’s moves.”

Jones started to smile, but the director’s next words made his mouth melt into a grimace.

“The others terrain agents, as well as the officials in all the places you visited had grown fed up with your temper. Therefore, you’ll be relocated here, in this very building. You’ll be stripped of all responsibilities and the corresponding salary bonuses. You’ll be stranded to an office near the satellite service, but you’ll have the lowest priority in the requests queue. Do you have any question?”

Jones swallowed with difficulty, before answering.

"I understand, sir. Thank you for your kindness."

The director, who had almost dismissed Jones by turning his chair to the side, looked up sharply.

"Was it a sarcastic comment, Jones?"

"No, sir. I thank you for the opportunity to continue on this mission. I know you could have sacked me, or worse."

"True, true." answered the older man absently, before turning again, picking a report and reading it intently.

Jones understood he had been dismissed and went to the door, when the director's voice caught him again.

"Jones, pray that your target leaves the place in the next year. I won't be able to justify your salary longer than that."

"Yes, sir." answered Jones meekly, before leaving.
A month later, again...

It took another month for Harry and his companions to find Petunia again. Of course, he had picked up her presence in Irbil, but it had been residual traces again, like in Hekari and Istanbul. They had had to ask questions and Harry had had to read minds for two weeks before heading to the southeast again, to a town called As Sulaymaniyah. During that time, Harry had experienced his regular nightmares, but they were also less stressful than before, as if he was more an onlooker at the hideous scenes rather than a participant. He suspected that his mental wall was acting in that regard, and resolved to continue to build it once they would find his mother. He also felt watched again, only this time it was at random moments, and always the far and skywards sensation. They had also exchanged currency in Irbil and As Sulaymaniyah, the banks reluctantly accepting to change their remaining Liras, as well as some American dollars, into Dinars.

Upon arriving in the part of the town where he suspected his mother was held, Harry deployed his awareness to the maximum range, and found the correct building. He was ecstatic, but also wary of her state. He got out of the car, and told Ulrike to drive around for a while to prevent suspicion. He would call to her mentally later. Once the car left, Harry walked to the building, establishing his plan on the way. He suddenly remembered what had happened in China when he had been pursued by the drunken men and stopped in a dark alleyway to explore his mind in search of his full memory of it. Once found, he understood how it worked, and changed his face to look like the Kurd children he had seen several times in his travels.

Once done, he approached the building, his awareness catching the visible and hidden guards, and he stopped several times to enter these persons' minds. Initially, he only wanted to know if he would be shot down without warning but, learning that he would, he forced the men to look somewhere else for five minutes.

Five minutes afterwards, and five guards turning back to their original spot, Harry was inside the building, in search of the person in charge. He had guessed that, leading that person by the mind would allow them to escape without getting shot at every corner. Using the guards' memories to learn about the person's name and location, he quickly went there.

And stopped.

The man was in the middle of a squirming sandwich, being pleased by two girls at the same time. Harry, his cheeks burning, learnt in one go several things he hadn't planned to learn. Especially not in that way. However, it was quickly clear that the girls were drugged, reluctant, and underage. Not supporting this in any way, Harry took control of the man, forcing him to settle the girls comfortably before dressing himself.

Harry had progressed since his first attempts at mind control. He was now able to act while controlling someone, and he used it since he had to follow the man in the corridors towards the prisons.

Once there, he almost cried upon discovering the famished state of his mother and sisters. Thankfully, the two girls were still much too young for the activity having taken place upstairs. He vowed to avenge them, but firstly, they had to be taken out. He directed the man outside, making him give the proper passwords to the guard posts, and the proper scowl to the other underlings. After leaving the building, he steered the man to a dark alley, and made him sit for 5 minutes. His mother, despite her tiredness, looked at him curiously but, when Harry returned his facial features to normalcy, she stared at him in shock.

And fainted.

“Stupid me.” mumbled Harry. He wasn’t strong enough to hold her.

Reaching for Ulrike, he directed her to their hiding place, and they put Petunia and the twins in the back seat. James was looking at his mother in shocked surprise, and Ulrike helped by trying to wake her and the twins up. She then gave the woman a bit of food and drink, while Harry turned to the man. Despite being a self-proclaimed figurehead for the Kurds, the man had murdered, raped, and burnt so many people and houses that he could be compared to Salim. Harry decided that the man was going to suffer like his mother had. He modified his conscious mind, delving into the limits of mind programming, to make the man avoid food from now on. He would only be able to eat a meagre lump of bread per day, and he would also sleep on the ground.

He would be a prisoner of his own mind.

Thinking back, Harry also implemented a fail-safe condition so that the man would return to normal after atoning for all his deeds.

They then left. Taking a quick glance at the world Atlas he had, Harry decided that the surest and shortest path home was through the Mediterranean Sea, which they would cross on boat from Egypt to France. Egypt was Harry’s choice over the other Mediterranean countries closer, because of the enmity between these. The most direct path, then, was southwards.

However, their car wasn't agreeing anymore. The faithful BMW which had taken them from Hanover to As Sulaymaniyah was now laden with sand. During the last 40 miles on the road from Dukan, the car had suffered difficulties, but they continued nonetheless, not wanting to have problems with Petunia captors. The poor car, however, choked its last breath at the village of Erbet, a mere 20 miles farther down the road. The village wasn't graced with a garage, and they only succeeded in exchanging their car – and a substantial lump of money – for a group of camels. One for each of them, and two for the luggage and water. It was a good deal, though, as Mustafa indicated. The camels didn't need gas, only water, and the riding beasts were the desert traveller's best friends despite their slowness. On top of that, Petunia and the twins needed almost constant help at the beginning. Travelling along the Sirwan river and pausing a few days in the villages they went through so that Petunia could rest, they took a full month to reach the capital.

Baghdad.

Upon reaching the town, they sold the camels and went in search of a place to stay while they would find a car to buy. Using his enhanced senses, Harry felt that several houses were only inhabited by one or two elders while being large enough for their whole group. Mustafa, like Ulrike, had grown to like travelling with Harry and James, and was faring better by himself. With this fact in his mind, Harry decided to try the mundane approach and asked Mustafa for his help. Several seconds afterwards, the two of them knocked at the door of one of the selected houses. That particular one was near the centre of the town, close to all the shops, while being in a seldom-used street. When the old woman opened it, a good five minutes afterwards, Mustafa asked politely if they could host them, in exchange of services and eventually money.

Surprisingly, the old woman agreed quickly and refused their money. To the group, she introduced herself and her husband as Almiyya and Sulam Ber'Anhaim, and a routine promptly settled. Ulrike was buying food and other necessities for the whole group, while Mustafa, disguising his Kurd origins, was able to discuss with the local men, gaining some political information in the process.

Harry explored his powers again. He was able to chat with James, Petunia, and the twins in English, but they were unable to talk to anyone else, and that had worn Petunia down during her months of incarceration. The twins were more resilient, but after recovering and chatting with their brothers about the time they missed together, they quickly grew bored. Noticing this, Harry had an idea. If he could learn languages through other peoples' mind, like he had done once again with the two elders, was it possible to give that knowledge to someone? Not wanting to force the issue, he explained his goal to Petunia, who readily agreed, even after been warned about the probable headache. They decided not to tell the other kids about it yet, but if everything went well, Harry would do the same thing for them. So, three weeks after their arrival, Harry went into his own mind, and made a copy of the memories related to speaking Arab. After doing so, he directly went in Petunia's mind and attached the memory chunk near to her own language block. He didn't stay much, because he distinctly felt her unease and growing headache. He could also perceive her peripheral thoughts, which were mostly directed on him and his magic. Just as he left her mother's mind, he saw one of her memories relative to him and his magic. It was the face of a bespectacled and bearded old man.

She couldn't talk about it immediately, though, as she was grasping her head in pain. Harry gave her one of his aspirin pills, and he forgot about the memory about the old man. Something he didn't forget, though, especially as he had nothing to do while he waited for his mother to recover from the language acquisition, was the tracking devices. He knew that he had one, and he suspected that the secret service agents had touched their bags too, and perhaps their car. Said car was now out of reach, but the bags weren't. He emptied them, going for unusual thick sides. He found that two of them had strange bumps on their bottom and, using a sharp knife, undid said bottom and found the strange-looking devices. They looked like an overly large coin, full of electronics. As the third bag was his own, he reflected that the agents must have done something with it, and explored the bag thoroughly. As the bag itself didn't seem to be modified, he rifled through his possessions, only stopping at his gun's box.

Closing the door to make sure that he wouldn't be interrupted, he opened it and removed everything. When he finally removed the red velvet lining, he discovered another of the infamous coins, and stored it with the others before restoring the package to its original state. He didn't think that the other members of his family were tracked in the same way as he was, but still asked them to search their bodies for unusual bumps, especially in their thighs. He told Petunia why, and showed her his own thigh with the embedded device. She gulped but offered her help to remove it. He didn't want to force her to pierce his skin, though, and asked Mustafa to help, as he knew that the man had been used to seeing blood in his long life in Kurdistan. After gathering the necessary supplies of alcohol, bandages, and sharpened knives, the old man, assisted by Ulrike, proceeded to the extraction of the infamous tracking device.

None of his siblings had such a device on themselves, nor did his mother. Gathering the 'coins' in a small box, he thought about what he could do with them. He could simply destroy them, or he could just leave them in the house here. However, in both cases, the agents watching him would know about it, and would storm the house where their gentle and old benefactors lived. Harry decided to adopt a third way: to mislead the agents searching for him. Just before leaving the town, he would innocently stick each device on a different car, using bubble gum. The devices would be deposited on the underside of the car, making them as unobtrusive as possible.

They weren't leaving yet, though, as James and Eva developed a quite incapacitating flu, and everyone was tending them, especially the still-malnourished Maureen. On top of that, they didn't find a van large and robust enough to bring them to Egypt. Harry and Ulrike waited, and waited, but no new model graced the car sellers' collection when the two youngsters finally healed and completely recovered, two months afterwards. During that time, though, Harry found some time, and a phone office kind enough, to place a call home. He felt guilty not to have called before, but honestly hadn't had either the time or possibility to do it.

The chat was quite long, despite Harry's thoughts about the line being monitored. These thoughts were of no use, though, as Vernon Dursley had been categorized as innocuous citizen after his slow

recovery. Not having the resource to monitor him, the CIA had dropped him. He had had to leave the large house, having just enough time to sell the furniture and collect his smaller belongings. Vernon had then gotten a small apartment nearby, arranging to keep the same phone number, in case his family wanted to phone. After telling him a much edited version of the events, Harry thanked him again for keeping the phone number, and told him they would be back in a few weeks. When he hung up, his ear was red and hot from the time passed with the receiver on it. And when he went to the cashier, he saw that the young man was looking at him with disbelief at the sum he had to pay. Harry paid the required fare, and returned to search for a car with Ulrike.

They really wanted to leave the area, and finally found a vehicle that could contain all of them. It was an old and rusty Chevrolet G20 van and, after filling the tank to the brink, and after Harry put into motion his plan of dispatching the tracking devices around the town, they all piled in, and started eastwards. Their initial plan had been to go through Jordan and reach Egypt from there.

On their way, though, they met several city guards, the members of the elite force of policemen who always patrolled the city. Unfortunately for them, when they had bought the van, they had chosen exactly the same model than the one that had been used several weeks before in a terrorist suicide explosion near the current leader's palace.

The city guards chased them immediately, and, confident in his abilities to prevent their interception by a mere patrol, Harry urged Ulrike forward. However, several police cars were quickly called to try to intercept them and they found themselves taking turns after turn in the large city, until they found themselves on a large road heading... southwards.

The van was followed by several cars, thankfully not equipped with weapons. Moreover, the roads' bad state prevented any lucky shot towards them. Harry had exploited his awareness to prevent being cornered while in Baghdad, and used his powers several times to connect to some drivers in order to make them turn around brusquely, thus blocking several cars each time. What he didn't know, though,

was that these cars were quickly joined with a small detachment of modified M151 jeeps, and the little column of military jeeps sped through the villages, following the van which was only a few miles ahead on the southward road.

Harry knew the global route, and he also retrieved the proper directions by fetching the local road map from the mind of people they saw on their way. They drove around Najaf and the other larger towns to avoid traffic, and when they arrived to the frontier, 350 miles after their departure, Harry used his senses to branch to the custom officers' minds, convincing them to let them pass. Using the relative pause given by the quickened procedure, they switched drivers so that a fresh Petunia could replace a thoroughly exhausted Ulrike. According to the map taken from an officer's mind, Harry found that they had to drive another hundred miles to reach the next important town. Judging from the vehicle consumption, they could make it, although barely.

The Iraqi military jeeps were stationed several miles behind them, waiting for the tanks. Once the strongly armoured vehicles arrived, they crossed the frontier without asking, as their only order was clear: kill the terrorists, whatever the cost. They didn't think they would cause a diplomatic incident as they crossed the frontier forcefully and entered Kuwait.

Before grabbing the telephone line reserved for emergencies, the officer in charge of the customs made note of the day and time of the invasion. The day was August 2nd, 1990.

On the other side of the world...

"My brethren!" wheezed the elder. "We have congregated here to celebrate our old ways and gods. May their light be on us!"

The assembled people in the windowless room repeated the last sentence.

The room had no window for a good reason: it was a basement. The basement of a modest house in the suburbs of Mexico City.

The twenty men there were the last remnants of the old Aztec priests of Tenochtitlan, and had only survived the onslaught of their city by creating a secret society that would intermingle with the invaders, but not become subservient to them. Now, almost five centuries later, their numbers had dwindled to a mere fifty, assembling in smaller groups to avoid detection. Some of them had succeeded in having an influent job while others were mere beggars, but they stayed together in their faith.

“Today, my brethren, we are to discuss the last prophecy our god Quetzalcoatl left us with. It has been passed from father to son from the time the evil Cortez destroyed our homes, and it is soon to be realized.”

The old man left the podium, using a cane, while another stepped up and read the prophecy. Its terms were clear: the sun god, whom they revered as one of the most important, was going to fight an important battle, and the day was approaching. Should he lose, the Earth would be plunged into eternal darkness, destroying all life on it.

They had to do something. They had to help their gods. Since they couldn't offer human sacrifice anymore, they had adapted their rites to offer their own blood, and all of them sliced their hands, dropping blood over a chalice. After the ritual, the old priest came back next to the younger one and explained the age-long prophecy and its unique interpretation.

One of them had to help their gods to fight. By rights of birth, and because of his strength, the young celebrant was unanimously designated, and, after disrobing him, the old one poured the chalice over his head.

The man was impressive. Naked, blood dripping from his head, it was a figurehead of war. The assembled men chanted a prayer to Tonatiuh, their sun god, and to Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent one, who was said to accompany Tonatiuh for that battle.

When the chant ended, aides approached and cleaned the man from the blood.

And they gasped. All of them did, before falling on their knees. Their prayers have been answered, and Tonatiuh had sent a sign! The man in front of them, initially dark-haired like all his ancestors, now had fiery red hair.

Another kind of peek into the future...

Dear Director,

Jones looked at the paper in front of him, and angrily torn it before throwing it on the floor with the other attempts he had made at writing a letter to his director. He was so tired that he couldn't remember how to start an official letter properly, and the cheap Bourbon he was imbibing wasn't helping his cognitive functions. But he had to tell the man about his findings. In the short time frame he had been allowed on the satellite, he had found that his target hadn't left the Iraqi capital. The signals sent by the tracked luggage, though, were moving around the town with the same apparent randomness as the boy himself. Although he didn't know why, many explanations were plausible, and all pointed to the fact that his target was still in Baghdad.

Agent Jones had also kept in touch with the international context around the Middle East zone, and learnt about the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the month before. The United Nations hadn't reacted much, and the United States hadn't moved at all, giving Iraq quite a leeway in the process. Kuwait and Iraq were both providing good petrol, with Kuwaiti giving large discounts to Halliburton. Iraq, though, was a great consumer of many good American weapons and war vehicles since 1980 and the beginning of the war against Iran. That war had ended two years ago, and Iraq's importation of American products had dwindled.

As it wasn't easy to take a decision, none was taken. Yet. And Agent Jones, alone in his bachelor pad in the residency nearest to his office, was struggling to write the letter which would upset the fragile balance.

It took him several weeks to confirm his data several times and to reach his director with the finally written memo. When he read it,

though, the old man's right eyebrow went up and he dismissed it as unimportant. At that point, Jones decided to circumvent the interfering old man, and address the Presidency immediately. It took him another month of scheming, but he finally reached the Oval Office's ear and, sweating, explained his case in front of a curious President, several uninterested Army Generals, and his apoplectic Director. He knew that he had put his career, perhaps even his life in the balance, but that job had filled his life until now, and there was no other way out.

The President was curious, though, and asked for more explanations on the target, and reading material on the topic. Having prepared for the worst, Jones had the required documents and more, and he left everything on the President's desk, with the recapping memo on top. He was asked to stay in a nearby hotel, so that he could meet the President again after the incoming Christmas. The CIA Director was red in the face when he left the room with everybody, but nothing could deflate Jones' happiness at that point. If the President was interested, his director would have nothing to say about it.

However, the Director of the CIA had many advantages, and Jones found himself definitely silenced a mere week after his intrusion in the Oval Office. He had had the necessary time to meet the President again, though, and History was on its way. After meeting the Generals and assessing the size of their available military forces, the President used the excuse of Iraq's threat towards Israel to launch on January 17th the military operation which would make the joy of CNN and several other media: Desert Storm. 40 days later, the Iraqi soldiers which were still searching for a missing van in Kuwait received the order to retreat and everybody ceased fire two days later. The American soldiers, who had been indoctrinated in seeking the tyrant, turned back home empty-handed before even entering Baghdad. However, everybody was happy when the official end of the war happened on April 3rd.

What nobody knew was that an intelligence mission actually entered Baghdad right before the troops approached and caught the tracking devices signals, leading them to the vehicles where Harry had stuck the trackers. The failure of that search put the President in a foul mood which lasted a whole month, but he calmed in time to sign the

end of war papers, mainly because the designated culprit, Jones, had been found dead months earlier.

And, during all that, someone was going to school, learning the way of the world and listening intently to news reports about the Persian Gulf crisis.

To be continued in next chapter: A Long Way Home...

Despite my abysmal score,
I liked History so much
That I can't stop an encore
From appearing here as such.

Chapter 6 – A Long Way Home

posted July 7th, 2005

August 2nd, 1990, near the Iraq-Kuwait border...

After driving the remaining distance to the outskirts of the Kuwaiti town of Al Jahra, they found a gas station and refilled their tank at a surprisingly low cost. When Harry thought about it, though, he remembered that Kuwait's main production was oil, and he shrugged. Harry and his family and friends then entered the modern town. There, they found a bank where they could exchange their remaining Iraqi Dinars into Riyals, the Saudi Arabia currency which was accepted as face value in Kuwait as well. Besides, they couldn't very well go back to Iraq now, and the other way to Egypt was through Arabia. They also found a car rental office, and they rented a Dodge Ram van. Of course, Harry's interference meant that they got the van without the administrative papers to fill, and with a reduced fee as well. They also didn't tell the hypnotized cashier where they would give it back, especially as they didn't know about it themselves yet.

While the following Iraqi army scoured the countryside around the frontier, Ulrike and Petunia drove the two vans westward until they arrived in a completely deserted countryside. There, they finished transferring everything from the rusty van to the newer one, and put fire to the former. Not wanting to attract undue attention to themselves, they didn't stay and left the vehicle to die down to unidentifiable charred remains while they drove the rest of the 200-mile long road to the first Arabian town of Hafar al Batin. While Petunia was behind the wheel, the twins regrouped with the boys in the first row of rear seats to allow Ulrike a bit of sleep. Despite arriving late at night, they took rooms in a rather upscale hotel and everyone got a much-needed respite.

During the first meal together afterwards, which happened to be dinner, Mustafa seemed clearly nervous, and Harry asked him the reason. It appeared that the man, although very old, had never made the pilgrimage his religion asked. And they were now in the appropriate country, heading in the right direction. Understanding the man, Harry drew a route from their current location to Mecca, using a road map of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, gotten from the hotel lobby.

They would then go north alongside the Red Sea, crossing Jordan and Israel to finally enter Egypt. Or they could cross the Red Sea and enter Sudan, then going north along the Nile. While they were quietly debating about it, Ulrike told them that cruising on the Egyptian river had been one of her dreams before, and Petunia wholeheartedly agreed to the suggestion. Laughing, Harry returned to the hotel lobby to buy maps from Sudan and Egypt as well. If everything went according to the plan, they would be in two days in Mecca where they would stay a few days while Mustafa would pray and circle the ancient shrine. The group would then cross the Red Sea between Jedda and Port Sudan, go north to reach Alexandria, in Egypt, roughly two weeks afterwards. From there, they would take a boat to France.

A month of travelling before being home again.

At the beginning of their trip, Murphy's Law didn't make an unwanted comeback, and everything went smoothly, despite having to solve some difficulties, and meeting some people.

In Mecca, the pilgrimage was going full swing, and they couldn't even approach the town centre by car. Buses were coming and going, delivering their flow of pilgrims. There were no hotels available, and the only free places were communal ones, accepting only men. With Mustafa, they decided to meet five days afterwards at Jedda's first bus station, which, being only 50 miles away, was reachable by bus in a few hours. During these five days, the others played and explored the surroundings, but they mostly rested. Harry used this time to book a place for their car in the shuttle boat, and Ulrike changed half their remaining Riyals into Sudanese dinars and the other half in Egyptian pounds.

After the agreed delay, they picked Mustafa at the designated place, and directly drove to the harbour where they waited for the boat to bring them to Port Sudan.

The drive from Port Sudan to Wadi Halfa, at the frontier with Egypt, was long but uneventful. During these 750 miles, the only difficulty was the heat, which compelled them to use the air conditioning system, which in turn forced them to drive slower than intended – in

order not to push the motor to its limits – and refill their tank more often than usual. After Wadi Halfa, they crossed Lake Nubia and found themselves in Abu Simbel where they made a pause to admire the temples of Ramses II and Nefertari, and to exchange currencies again. Taking the road again, they reached Aswan, enjoying the view on Lake Nasser and its dam on the way.

At Aswan, after taking information from the local tourism office, they decided together that cruising on the whole length of the Nile would take them too long, and settled on using their car again after Luxor. The women wanted to profit from the cruise, and Harry resolved that he could take the car with Mustafa. Uttering this, he knew that Mustafa would object because the old man had never learnt to drive a car. However, Harry shushed him mentally, as he was going to either teach the man or possess him. Wishing James and the women and girls a good cruise, he went back to the car and sat with Mustafa. He explained the solutions to him, and the old man chose to be taught how to drive over being possessed, even if he came to understand that Harry had done it already. Despite the strange feeling upon the revelation, the old man knew that he had felt more alive in the previous months than in the preceding years, especially after his pilgrimage.

Harry gave him a preventive aspirin before copying into his mind the memories of driving, which he had taken from Ulrike, months before. Mustafa then drove northwards, and arrived in Luxor in the evening, a few hours later. Knowing that the others wouldn't arrive before the next day, they drove around the town and headed for the Valley of the Kings. At least, passing through Egypt, they would have seen some of its attractions.

With a beautiful sunset illuminating the numerous temples in front of them, Mustafa and Harry tried to walk against the packs of tourists coming back from the East Valley where most of the tombs were. However, they were outnumbered and decided to leave the fat, sweating, and rampaging tourists to their schedule and explored the West Valley instead.

And Harry got a surprise...

...which intensified when Mustafa asked what was wrong.

Contrarily to what Harry had fetched from the tourist guides, the West Valley wasn't limited to three tombs. In front of his eyes were buildings even more impressive than those in the other valley. And Mustafa decided to break his stare by asking why he was staring at the bare and rocky mountainside.

Bare? Rocky? He had been looking at the largest of the temples around, which was ignored by the very few tourists around, and where, surprisingly, people seemed to be working. The magnificent building was at least four stories high, and the statues on it were reflecting the sunlight in myriads of colours. The building and statues also didn't seem made only in stone like the tombs in the East Valley, and they weren't broken either. Despite its brand-new aspect, Harry instinctively knew that it was the same age as the others, perhaps even older. He described the temple to his old companion, and the man's answer surprised him again.

He wasn't seeing it.

And when Harry wanted to approach to investigate, the man clearly refused, indicating that he would be waiting for Harry in the van.

Harry went to check on the ancient temple, trying to school his expression, but failing in front of the golden doors and jewelled statues. How comes no thief had tried to steal them in the centuries it had rested there? His expression must have given him away, because he had the surprise to hear someone speaking to him from his right.

"First time around, kid?"

He nodded, mouth still agape.

The man who had talked seemed in his early twenties. His red hair was pulled in a loose ponytail and a tooth of some large animal was dangling from one of his ears. He looked at Harry, a thoughtful look on his face. "I remember my first time too. It was six years ago, and I fell for the country like one would fall for a beautiful wom-"

remembering the standing boy's apparent age, the man stopped there, looking back at the statue and blushing slightly. He spoke a bit more to hide his unease. "Well, it was back when I graduated. The goblins offered the job and I took it. Now I only break curses in Egypt. There is enough work with all the temples and pyramids. Have you visited the magical school in Gizeh yet? I know for a fact that it's almost as impressive as this temple can be." he said, looking at the boy again.

Harry had been looking at the statue in surprised wonder. Now, he was looking at the man in the same way, not daring to move. He hadn't understood everything from the speech, but some words had caught his attention. Curses. Magical. After all these years, he had perhaps finally found someone with the same talent as his. He didn't dare moving, though, afraid that the man would disappear suddenly. Said man didn't understand Harry's stillness, and looked around in unease, before talking to Harry again.

"Are you lost, boy?"

Harry felt that the man would leave if he didn't decide to act, and he blurted the first question that came to his mind.

"Who are you?"

He blushed, but the man laughed. "Of course! I didn't present myself! Shame on me, would say my mother. I'm Bill. And you are?" he asked, extending his hand.

"I'm... I'm Harry." answered Harry, shaking the proffered hand.

"So," said Bill, straightening up, "back to the topic at hand: are you lost?"

Harry shook his head. "I'm not. I mean... unless Mustafa decided to leave with the van..."

"Is he your guardian? I guess he isn't your father since you didn't say 'dad'..." said Bill, smiling gently.

Harry's face went down. "No. He's a nice guy who helped to get mom out of trouble. We will meet them tomorrow at the docks."

"Bring them along, then. I'm sure that they would enjoy the sights."

"Actually..." started Harry, before going silent. Despite the man's cheerful attitude and the relaxed appearance suggested by the ponytail and earring, Harry wasn't sure he could confide to the man securely.

"What?" asked the redhead after a few seconds of silence.

Harry blushed. He had wanted to explore the man's mind to be sure of his loyalties, but Bill's mind was enclosed in a solid-looking wall of bricks, and he hadn't had time to levitate over it or do anything else before the question.

"Well... they can't... I mean... Mustafa didn't see... so I suppose..."

"They are muggles?" asked Bill.

"They are what?"

"Muggles. You know? Like in Muggle-born stu... Oh Merlin, you are one! How old are you?"

Harry felt lost in the rapid speech, but answered the last question nonetheless. "I'm ten." And that was true. He had had a very small but heartfelt birthday party just two days before escaping Baghdad.

"Ten?" answered Bill. "Okay. So you'll know of your school next year, I guess."

"School?" asked Harry. The more the man talked, the more he got confused. What did the school have to do with his age?

“Yes, school. Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, Durmstrang, Taaleb al-Giza...”

Harry looked lost. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Where do you live?”

“Well, I have been on the road quite a long time recently.” he answered, looking at his feet and blushing.

Bill looked at him, lost in thoughts himself. Strangely, he felt that he could believe the boy, even if he had just met a few minutes before. Suddenly aware of the darkening sky, he looked at the setting sun and motioned to Harry to follow him. “Follow me, I’ll walk you back to the muggle zone, where your... vat should be.”

After a few seconds following the man, Harry’s mind reacted. “Vat? Didn’t you mean ‘van’?” he asked in wonder. “And, by the way, you still didn’t tell me what does ‘muggle’ means?”

“Oh, sorry. Yes I meant van, even if I don’t know what it is.” At that, Harry’s eyebrows shot up, but Bill continued. “A muggle is a non-magical person. As you saw the protected temple, I assumed that you must be magical. Your family might be, or not. The surest way is to bring them all here tomorrow. As the West Valley only has a few muggle tombs, there are not many tourists here. Most are wizards and witches.”

“Can I come back tomorrow?”

“Did you see me putting up barriers?” asked Bill rhetorically.

“Well... no.”

“Then you can come with them. Muggles are repelled by the wards, though, so if none of your family members is magical, they won’t want to follow you.”

Harry nodded thoughtfully, and they walked in companionable silence for a few minutes, before arriving near the parking lot. As usual before entering a public area, Harry expanded his senses, intending to scan the area and to check about Mustafa. Before getting the usual answer, though, he felt a jolt upon discovering the aura of the man next to him. It was an orange aura, extending a foot out of the man, and it was swirling with power, while radiating gentleness. The reason behind his shock was that ordinary people, people he had 'felt' this way, had for the most part a dull grey aura which never went farther than a fraction of an inch off their body. Because of his shock, he completely forgot about his usual area sweep.

Harry had stopped at the revelation, and the man had stopped as well.

"Did you feel that?" he asked Harry, while removing something which looked like a twig from one of his pockets.

"Feel what?" enquired Harry, looking at the 'twig' in wonder.

"I just felt a surge of power nearby. You are sure you felt nothing?" he asked, browsing the surroundings.

"Well... I felt... something, true."

Bill was busy muttering strange-looking words while swirling the wooden stick around. He finally sighed and pocketed it. "Well, nothing strange. Perhaps one of my colleagues worked late. I'll check about it tomorrow."

Turning to Harry, he noticed the boy's gaze toward his wand and explained. "This is my wand. Every wizard and witch has one, as it is essential to cast spells. You'll have one soon, I think." At this, he extended his hand. "Will I see you tomorrow?"

Grasping the hand and shaking it, Harry forgot about the wand and nodded enthusiastically. When Bill walked away, Harry expanded his senses again, but in a more 'discreet' fashion. It went slowly and steadily toward Bill, and the redhead didn't appear as if he felt a thing.

“ Good.” thought Harry. “Now I can detect... magical people... wizards... around.” It was strange to think about those magic-wielding persons, but, now that he had encountered Bill, he knew that they could be trusted.

He was partly wrong, as the future would show him.
Nearby...

Mummad Al-Arwah sighed. Damn the boy! He was always accompanied and overly protective. He knew that the boy was magical, because of the state of his brother's mind when he had found him. His brother had been the Kurd officer in charge of the prison of As Sulaymaniyah. Despite being a muggle, he had been clever and ambitious. However, Mummad had found him emaciated and barely living in a hospital bed, slowly dying of hunger. Delving into the man's mind, he had found the block, and tried to remove it, but the job had been made thoroughly, and he couldn't uproot it without sending his brother into a catatonic state, which would be deadly in his current state. He also found the failsafe condition, but knew that his brother, like himself, wouldn't atone for something he considered as normal.

In the man's mind, he also found the face of his attacker. A boy! A mere boy had put the powerful man in that state. He explored more about the memory and found that the boy could change his face, and that he had some family, as well as two friends, one of them being a Kurd himself. From the occidental-looking faces of the family, he had guessed that they would try to go back to their own countries and he had to find them quickly before they did. He had extracted everything he could from his brother's mind, and started to track the fugitives southwards.

It took him three whole months to reach them in Luxor, and he found that the boy had discovered a wizard friend. He was as surprised by the sensor sweep as Bill was, but was too far to be discovered. Besides, the boy was focussed to what the other wizard was doing with his wand. If he hadn't, and if he had continued to check around, he would have noticed the Kurd wizard hiding under a disillusionment spell. After the van left, Mummad stood up and followed it from afar,

on his flying carpet. Once they entered Thebes, he knew what to do. After all, the Hashishin sect was still present in many countries, and professional killers could always be hired.

The next evening...

Bill was castigating himself. Harry hadn't reappeared, and Bill couldn't search for him or send an owl, as he didn't have his last name. "Where are my manners?" he asked himself for the tenth time of the day. "I didn't give my full name, why would he have?"

He didn't know that, at the same time, Harry and his companions were 50 miles to the west, sleeping under the starry sky of the Egyptian desert.

Earlier that day...

The sun greeted Mustafa and Harry as they were taking their breakfast in the hotel. The day started peacefully, and Harry envisioned a midday visit to the beautiful temple with everybody. However, he wanted to ask several questions to Bill, and convinced Mustafa to drive him there again. However, as soon as they entered the van, a loud detonation was heard and the driver's window shattered. Mustafa, who had been sitting there, hissed in pain while holding his obviously wounded arm. Noticing this, Harry lost no time in expanding his senses in the direction where the bullet came from, while moving away from the window. It was a good thing, as said window shattered also, and another bullet drew a hole in his seat. Meanwhile, Harry had just found the first killer, and taken control of him. The second one succeeded in shooting another time before being frozen as well. In the van, Harry's body was immobile, eyes shut in concentration, while Mustafa was trying to start the engine, intending to leave the dangerous place quickly.

"Stop." said Harry mere seconds afterwards.

"What is it?" asked Mustafa. "We have to leave! I don't want to be shot again!"

“These two won’t shoot us again, but others could. I have to find a way out.” And Harry closed his eyes again, concentrating on exploring the memories of the now immobile sharpshooters. Minutes afterwards, the police would find the men frozen at the same place in the same position, still holding the rifles. Their memories, though, wouldn’t be with them anymore, as Harry had uprooted them and taken them in his own mind for perusal. That’s how he knew that several other shooters were planted in the town with their van’s description in their mind. He also knew that the men, despite acting on their own volition, had had their minds trifled with by someone. Someone who was unidentifiable in the modified memories, but someone who had visibly cast a spell on the memories. With a wand. A wizard!

If a wizard was after them, Harry thought, they didn’t stand a chance in the large town. He checked the town map from the killers’ memories, and found that there was a way through the shooters. He would need to overcome a few of them, but, now that they were warned about their position, he had the upper hand.

He opened his eyes and, noticing Mustafa’s weakened state, went outside and asked for a cab. When one arrived, he transferred Mustafa and asked for a drive to the International Hospital. On their way, three shooters saw their orders modified by Harry. After the cab passed by them, they found themselves quickly stowing their weapon away and leaving their shooting spot. Their mission was now to try to find the ‘person’ who had given them the killing order, and kill that person instead. Harry didn’t feel ashamed about ordering the wizard’s death, as the man had wanted them dead first. Because of everything he had seen in the elapsed year, through his eyes and in people’s minds, he didn’t have second thoughts about it. His Shaolin-induced serenity and the wall he continued to build around his mind also helped in dealing with the hideous memories.

However, as their description was known by several ill-mannered persons, he supposed it would be safer to leave the well-travelled road to the north, and to escape through the desert. In the shooters’ memories, he had picked the market’s place, a spot where they could exchange almost anything. After leaving Mustafa in the hospital, convincing the doctors that the case was urgent, Harry went to the

marketplace. There, he bought a pack of camels, which, once again, he managed to get for a good price. He also checked from the seller's mind that they were in good shape and condition, able to go as fast as possible. He also rented a guide who could direct them through the desert, and bought several water containers as well as proper protective clothes and creams, as well as sunglasses for everybody. Making sure that the guide was honest, he left him with the camels, outside the town gates nearest to the hospital.

During all this exchange, which lasted three hours, Harry changed the mission orders of five other shooters, leaving the two remaining ones alone. Surprisingly, etched in the second professional killer's mind, he found the wizard's face. Obviously, he had been the last to have his memory modified, and the wizard had grown sloppy. Harry tried to find his other wizard-seeking shooters to give them the information, but failed. He could, however, give the information to the three subsequent killers, and four assassins were thrown on the trail of a bearded man whose face was scarred in a particular and unmistakable way. To be sure that his order was carried successfully, he also added a mental injunction to send a particular letter to his address in France as soon as the mission was completed.

Midday arrived, and he took a van cab to get his family from the docks. They picked the remaining luggage from Harry and Mustafa's hotel room, and got Mustafa from the hospital, before going to the still-waiting pack of camels. On the way, Harry explained in English – which he knew the cab driver wouldn't understand – about the recent events. He didn't say anything about Bill, but the rest of the message was clear. They had someone on their trail, and needed to leave through the seldom-travelled route.

They headed to the west, and pushed the camels to their cruising speed, eating sandwiches on the way. Eight hours afterwards, they established their camp near a rocky outcropping which would incidentally hide their campfire – they would have been spotted miles away otherwise – and they slept.

The next day, they arrived in the Kharga oasis, and rested their wary bones. Hopefully, they would fare better after a few days. After a good night of sleep, they continued westwards again. After three days

of using a well-defined trail, they refilled their water containers at the Dakhla oasis, resting their camels too. Their guide advised them to buy a few other containers to cross the Libyan desert, where they would spend at least ten days without water and with no trail to follow. And they did.

After a week of travelling under the unforgiving sun, they found themselves waking up with company. The sun was rising and its light was already blinding, but Harry still noticed that their captors were all clad in the same way, with a deep blue veil. The guide had told them about the blue-capped nomads who had travelled the desert for centuries, their indigo-coloured veil giving a blue tinge to their face. The Touaregs.

They were also holding curvy swords, quietly preventing resistance, and two of them were talking with their guide in a dialect which Harry hadn't heard before. They seemed to argue about them, and one of the men suddenly lifted his sword to the guide's throat. Harry knew that he had to do something. Without their guide, they would be lost, and the men didn't seem amenable. He quickly delved into his guide's mind and extracted two specific memories. The first one he took was just in case they actually lost the guide, as it was how to find one's way in the desert without dying, the memory encompassing the location of water holes. The other memory was the whole Language block, which Harry didn't measure before importing. To his dismay, the guide had travelled around the desert many times, and had learned the language and dialects of many countries and tribes on the way. Harry held his head in pain, before taking an aspiring pill. To the men around them, some of them startled at his move, he spoke.

"What? I have a headache!" he said in perfect Tomacheck.

The men jumped in shock, and his family looked at him as if he had grown a second head. The nomads had never seen a tourist able to speak their tongue before. The two leaders looked at the guide with a suspicious look, and the argument started again, although this time, Harry understood everything. The Touaregs didn't want tourists to cross their land, especially as tourists generally belonged to the rich countries that had split their previously open desert into countries. Since that parting, they had been separated in abstract entities,

forced – quite unsuccessfully – to stay in one country. That would have caused the death of their culture, as the water holes they depended on didn't know anything about country boundaries. The guide, who appeared to have been one of them before lending his services to said tourists, told them that he had been paid to cross the desert and, as they had shared the bread and the water, his honour bound him to lead them to their destination. They weren't convinced, though, and wanted a ritual fight to decide.

The guide blanched. Harry, peeking at the man's mind, understood that he wasn't skilled in fighting, something that had caused him to flee his former Touareg tribe. In the man's mind, they would certainly all be emptying their blood on the sand soon. However, he also noticed, from the man's memories of Touareg traditions, that any member of a group could participate, and that the defeated group could choose the weapon used. The Touaregs always used the sword, but accepted any form of weapon in these fights, even none. Whatever the result of the fight, the placed price must be paid, after which both groups could live in peace again. These ritual fights were often used to settle problems between clans, and served as an outlet for any angry feeling between them.

Harry stood up, and spoke several words which made the blue-clad nomads look at him with wider-than-usual eyes.

“I will do it. I choose unarmed combat. First one unconscious loses. Shall it be written in the sand.” he said, finishing with the usual sentence.

After several seconds, the blue men left and discussed about the proposal. The guide sat down, defeated and quite shameful at himself for letting one of his young charges in danger. Petunia frantically asked Harry, then the guide, about what had been said, but both refused to answer. After a few minutes, the Touareg leader came back, flanked by a visibly large man.

“We agree. If you win, we'll escort you to your destination. If we win, we leave you here with enough camels and water to turn back to

where you came. Without your guide.” he said, pausing for a second before concluding with the ritualistic sentence. “What is written in the sand is read by the Almighty.”

Harry nodded, and started to prepare, while everybody looked at him. The 10-year old hadn't forgotten anything from his lessons in the Chinese temple, and he started by shedding his clothes to improve his agility. He then took sun protection cream from his bag and put a large dollop in his hand before handing the bottle to James with a wink. Understanding the dual goal of the manoeuvre, James smirked before applying a good helping of cream on Harry's back while Harry himself liberally coated his chest and arms with it.

Thinking that the fight will be over in a matter of seconds, the Touaregs didn't understand the boy's actions, apart from knowing that any bare skin exposed to the desert sun would get sunburnt in seconds. Especially fragile tourists' skin. Thankfully for Harry, it was still early morning.

He then went to the Touaregs who had sat in a rather large circle, their champion waiting in the middle. Petunia finally understood what Harry was doing and cried hysterically, while being held and comforted by Ulrike.

The fight was strange. The man was strong, but he was encumbered by his outfit. In a standard Touareg fight, the outfit helped to protect against the opponent's sword slices, but here, it was a burden. On top of that, the strong man had only fought empty-handed in brawls and didn't know about escape manoeuvres. Harry, though, despite being heated by the sun, knew about that. The sun cream wasn't only protecting him from the sun rays, but also from the man's grasp, as it made his skin slippery.

After several seconds into the fight, Harry resolved to use a quick way to end it, and put himself in the Snake fighting form, undulating like a snake. That elicited an anxious gaze from his opponent, as well as frantic murmurs from the Touareg onlookers: they clearly identified the animal being portrayed, and the snake was one of the desert's deadliest animals. James was silently cheering for his brother, and Petunia finally understood Harry's goal and chances of success.

The Snake form had the advantage of being able to attack vital points with both hands, while still having them available to defend. Harry didn't need much defence, though, as a mere step on the side made his opponent's mighty punches slip on his cream-coated skin. He continued to move slowly, waiting for an opening. However, he would never be able to hit his opponent's neck easily with the blue veil in the way. On top of that, he suspected that it wasn't easy to remove. He certainly couldn't snatch it out of midair and resolved to make the other man remove it. He went thrice for it, grasping at the veil and lowering it in front of the man's eyes, before the man got fed up and removed the veil, throwing it away in an angry gesture. The man thought he had removed one of Harry's weapons and smiled, but when his smile got reflected on the boy's face, he grew uneasy. Using the man's hesitation to his advantage, Harry jumped, and both hands landed at his opponent's neck. The man fell on the sand, unconscious.

While the nomads looked at the boy in wonder, James hurried forward with a cloth to towel off Harry's sweat and cream, before helping him pull his garb again. During that time, Harry extended his senses to the fallen man to check on his state. Thankfully, the man was only unconscious. Harry hadn't put all his strength behind the strike, or the man could have had difficulties with either his blood flow or his vertebrae. However, when Harry noticed the man's aura thanks to the scan, he was surprised. The man in front of him, like all the other Touaregs, had a deep blue aura with bright yellow swirling in it. None had the same than the others, and all were extending two inches outside of their body. Less than the Luxor wizard, Bill, but more than most of the persons he had met before. He didn't know why that was, though, and just supposed that it reflected the men's innate sense of the desert, mingled with centuries of experience evolved into instinctual patterns.

James led a thoughtful Harry back to the others and Petunia scolded him for his recklessness, before hugging him in relief. The twins, not clearly remembering the Shaolin tournament, were impressed at their oldest brother's shrewdness. After all, the boy had asked for it, and prepared for it. And, when he had fought it, he had struck only once at the other man, his nimbleness preventing him to be touched. Ulrike

and Mustafa shared a look before hugging Harry with Petunia. Both of them had shared some of Harry's thought processes while being possessed by him, and they respected the powerful boy, having just witnessed another facet of his possibilities.

After hoisting their fallen champion to his feet, the Touaregs willingly filled their part of the bargain, and accompanied them. After leaving the campsite, they slowly started to discuss about things, and Harry told them that they were headed for Europe through Tunisia. This surprised the guide a bit, but he understood that Harry and his companions had nothing to do in Sabha. The nomads proposed to lead them to Nalut, a Libyan town closer to the frontier with Tunisia, but Harry politely refused. He had checked before the trip, and knew that he would be able to get a vehicle in Sabha, thus reaching Tunis in a few days instead of several more weeks of camel riding.

After reaching the Kufra oasis in Libya, where every human and camel refilled their water supply, they surprisingly continued southwards for two days, and the Touaregs welcomed them in their current base camp, comprising many large tents in which women and children were living. On the evening, they also held a feast in their honour and told their families about the deal struck with the group. To the youngsters who weren't believing the story, Harry demonstrated some moves and got stuck in several mock fights. On the following morning, they left early and headed directly to the northwest, toward Sabha.

It took them twelve days to reach the modernized town, and Harry made good use of that time to complete his mind wall, testing it himself several times. He also built another one around the dark shroud which was always at the back of his mind. After completing that one, he didn't experience nightmares anymore.

Once arrived in Sabha, Harry thanked the nomads profusely. To obey the tradition, he insisted in giving their guides something of their own, and the whole group parted with all of their desert-adapted protective garb. If everything went smoothly, they wouldn't be wearing it anymore, and the blue men could make a good use of them. Harry also paid their guide his pre-established fare, despite the fact that the

man was now re-integrated in his nomadic tribe and didn't need the money.

A mere hour afterwards, a bank in Sabha saw two tanned occidental-looking women entering and change a rather large sum in Egyptian money into Libyan dinars. Thanks to Harry, they had seldom used their money at all since Iraq, obtaining items and services at a reduced, if not null, price. They spent a night sleeping in comfortable beds and, while the others leisurely ate the subsequent breakfast, Harry helped Mustafa rent a used Range Rover. They packed everything in it, and soon left the town northwards. They switched drivers several times, Mustafa now able to partake in the task, and they spent the night in Tripoli where they arrived in the evening. The next day saw them rising early, before driving along the coast and then through Tunisia, where they reached Tunis as the sun was already set. On their way, they also spent a good part of the trip discussing about the newspapers Harry bought in Tripoli. The boy had wanted to get information about the world, but, to his amusement, most papers spoke about Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and United States' reaction. The second topic of interest was the treaty, signed by the six countries involved, with respect to Germany, and that raised a few eyebrows as well.

The next morning, they returned the car and packed their belongings before heading for the airport. Harry knew that Vernon had moved, but he didn't know where, and he didn't want to go to their French house, thinking that it was still watched. They had discussed about it on their way to Tunis, and agreed that Petunia called him – something she had been so eager to do that she had jumped in place, causing the vehicle she was driving to swerve dangerously, before she calmed herself. They could have called him before, but they had been either in a deserted area, or in a hurry to leave. Now, though, in Tunis airport, Petunia found a vacant phone booth and, after buying a phone card, called her husband. They spoke for an hour non-stop, grilling the phone card, and when Petunia hung up, she blushed.

Looking at Harry, she said "I forgot to tell him to meet us in Rome."

He smiled gently, and handed her the phone card he had just bought five minutes earlier. She phoned Vernon again, and this time, she

started by giving him an appointment in Rome's Hilton hotel for as soon as possible. Harry reminded her to ask Vernon to bring any mail they could have received, before letting her consume the second one-hour phone card.

During that time, he went with Ulrike to book seats on the next flight to the Italian capital, and they "bizarrely" obtained a seat upgrade for all of them. They then returned to their companions to dispatch the tickets, before heading to a local restaurant, taking Petunia on the way. They ate silently, all of them knowing that it was their last hours in Africa. Apart from Mustafa, they were on their way back, after almost a year of absence, and were thoughtful about it.

They passed the controls and Harry, remembering about the gun he had taken from Germany and never used, had just the time to seize the security officer's mind while his bag was passing in the X-Ray box. Their plane took off on time, and landed in the same way. During the flight, Harry learned to speak Italian from some returning tourists, and passed the ability to his family and friends. They all had to use aspirin afterwards, but it would be useful should they stay in Italy for a long time.

From Leonardo da Vinci airport, they called for a taxi van. While they were waiting for it, Harry looked at the numerous hotel prospectuses, and his brows were furrowed. Once the van appeared, they loaded their luggage inside, before packing themselves in it as well. Petunia then opened her mouth, but Harry cut her in.

"Arcangelo hotel, per favore."

"Si, ragazzo mio."

To the others, Harry motioned that he would tell about it later. They arrived in front of a beautiful yellow brick facade, and quickly took possession of three rooms, before Harry explained.

"I don't know about dad's phone line, but I suspect it is still listened to by our dear "men in black"."

Petunia looked confused. "Why would they listen to it? And, even if you're right, why should we be wary of them? They are American agents, after all."

Harry sighed. "You see, mum, when we were in China, I felt observed all the time. And I was." he added to quiet Petunia's protests. "Don't ask me how I know, though. I just know. And I felt the same thing in France. They bought the houses for us, you see? So that they could place cameras everywhere."

"Cameras?" Petunia was paling drastically, thinking about the things she did in the "safety" of her house. "Everywhere?" she added in a small voice.

Harry nodded, and elaborated. "In Zheng Zhou, the cameras were almost everywhere inside the house. Because I knew I was observed, I didn't do anything... strange, and I guess that's why they moved us. For our house in Beausoleil, they installed them outside the house, hence the large windows. But they didn't cover the bathroom or the other rooms devoid of windows."

"Mummy?" Eva piped in, shaking her now-pale mother's sleeve, "Were we cameraed too?"

Petunia didn't react, but Harry confirmed it for her. "Yes, Eva. But they only recorded my signal."

"Boo... spoilsports!" exclaimed Maureen, before intently listening to the story again, even if she, like her sister, didn't understand everything.

"Signal? What do you mean?" asked James.

"They implanted a tracking device in my leg. I guess they did it when I was at the hospital in China."

"Oh my god!" Petunia brought her hands to her mouth in shock.

“What does it do?” asked James, curious about the technical parts, as usual.

“Did. I got rid of them in Baghdad. It allowed them to know where I was. I think it works better in certain places, because they only needed three days to find us in Istanbul, and I didn’t feel them again until we entered Iraq almost two months afterwards.”

After a short pause, he continued.

“So, not knowing if dad’s line is secure, I preferred us to live in another hotel. I will go to the Hilton under disguise, and I’ll wait for him here. We’ll leave afterwards. In the meantime,” he added, smirking at Petunia and Ulrike, “you can pay a visit to the independent country nearby.”

“Country?” asked Petunia. “Which country?”

Harry paused for effect, before saying “The Vatican.” He smiled to the surprised gaze of the two women and continued. “We are quite close to it, and you could use a bit of real tourism extravaganza. Just ask me for anything expensive so I can get you a discount.”

“By the way, Harry, how do you do it?” asked Mustafa in English. As they were going to spend a long time together, Harry had taught him the language during their desert trip. “I couldn’t prevent myself from noticing you doing it several times during our... trip.”

Harry blushed. “Well... I can’t really explain. It’s all linked to what the agents-in-black want from me. And to the fact that you are here too.” He turned to Ulrike. “You too. I picked you both without asking first, and never asked your forgiveness for it. I’m sorry. For you, Ulrike, Jorg had called and told us to leave the house and take you to a hospital. We couldn’t really drive a car or travel by ourselves safely, so I forced you to follow.” Looking toward Mustafa again, he continued. “Same for you, Mustafa. We desperately needed information about our mother’s location, and all the debating places were reserved for men. I’m sorry to have uprooted you both.” he finished, looking at his feet in shame.

A silence.

When Mustafa spoke again, it was in a slightly altered voice. "Don't be sorry. In fact, I'm thankful. You accepted me in your group, not like an underling even if I know you could have done so, and also allowed me to partake in my religious duties. I also visited several countries and learned many interesting things."

"The same goes for me, Harry." said Ulrike after wiping her eyes. "I don't remember clearly, but it seems to me that I was always in front of the television, watching god-knows-what."

"The shopping channel." James piped in, and everyone laughed.

She blushed, but quickly joined in the general mirth.

"Harry?" asked Petunia after a while. "How are you going to disguise yourself? For the Hilton, I mean."

Harry merely smiled. He closed his eyes, and opened them again. She gasped, as the eye colour was now brown instead of the usual green. She remembered what had happened when she had been rescued, and understood that her son was able to disguise himself quite efficiently. She nodded, afraid that he would answer her next question with an even more impressive display of magic.

That's when she remembered.

She had quite forgotten about it, but Harry had always been in control of his magic. She didn't remember her own early childhood, but now that she thought about it, it didn't seem that Lily was able to do anything magical before heading for the magical school – what was its name, already? Hotsmarts? Logwarts? Martwalls? – and it was always with her stick. Petunia looked at the son they had adopted several years ago, wondering if she should have warned the magical people about him. She mentally shrugged. Even if she had to, she couldn't reach them, so the option was out.

Harry prepared himself, keeping his brown eyes, and wishing his hair was brown instead of its usual pitch black colour. Unlike every other child, his hair obeyed, and Harry had just to modify his face a bit to look like a perfect Italian child. He then took a cab for the Hilton.

Once at the place, he peeked in the valet's mind to get the floor plan of the hotel, and entered by the personnel door. Modifying the memory of the few people he encountered so that they wouldn't remember him, he arrived behind the reception desk. He then entered the receptionists' minds, first modifying their perception of him, and then extracting several interesting information. Their director, Mr Giovanni Sciapella, had informed his personnel that a few persons were to stay in the lobby for several days and weren't to be disturbed. Apparently, Vernon's phone line hadn't been secure at all. Harry mentally scanned the large lobby from behind the counter and found three tourists, four CIA agents, one carabinieri, two hotel maids cleaning the rooms, and one...

Danger!

He stopped the scan suddenly, retracting his powers behind his now complete mind wall. One of the persons in the lobby had had a dark red aura the size of Bill's, and it surely meant that the person was a wizard. Besides, Harry hadn't found about the person's identity, and supposed he, or she, must have a protective shield around his, or her, mind. He seriously wished he could be invisible, now. His magic stretched but had difficulties adapting to his demand, and he wasn't turning invisible at all. He would have to think about it later, though. For the moment, he just scampered deeper under the counter so as not to be seen even by customers bending over it. The receptionists were another story, but he had modified their perceptions so that they wouldn't see him. As if he had a 'notice-me not' note stuck on his forehead.

He heard a feminine voice with an American accent asking the man at the reception desk if they had seen somebody entering the lobby, but he denied it, and she huffed, before going back to her seat.

'Phew! That was close.' Harry thought.

He didn't move yet, though. He couldn't guess why the woman didn't make a scan like him when a thought occurred to him. Perhaps she couldn't. Perhaps she was forced to use a stick, like Bill, to do magic. Perhaps she couldn't do so in a place full of non-magical people – how did Bill call them? Muttles? Gummles? Ah yes. It was Muggles.

Harry remembered that Vernon Dursley was strong, and could take on several persons, especially in a public place where his public relation talent worked to its fullest. However, the magical woman – the witch, as Bill called them – was another story. Besides, a long time had flowed and things might have changed regarding his father. He decided that, being stuck in this uncomfortable place, he could at least try to do something to her.

Like he had done with Bill, but with even more precautions as the witch was surely surveying the surroundings, he extended his senses toward the seat where he knew she was sitting. To his surprise, nothing happened and his mind eye found the woman, reading a glossy magazine intently. From the attention she gave to her reading, Harry suspected that he could try to enter her mind. Very slowly, his mind eye approached her head, before being engulfed in a red stream emerging in the usual psychedelic landscape. The sky, the ground, and the mountains around always were a different colour depending on the person. Like in Bill's case, Harry found a wooden wall surrounding her active mind, but it was in a shoddy state. What was different, though, was the pair of hounds heading his way. Obviously, there was a patrol job around the wall, and Harry suspected that it was how the woman had known about his scan. He was ready to escape the hounds by pulling on his thought tendril when a dome suddenly appeared around the whole landscape, cutting that strand where it touched it.

Harry was trapped in her mind, and the hounds were approaching.

However, he wasn't finished yet. He concentrated on something he first did in Ulrike's mind, such a long time ago. He levitated.

He had to concentrate harder, though, as the mind wasn't agreeing on him fleeing the hounds that way. He distinctly felt the gravity

increase and knew that if he fell, he could break a bone – virtually, of course, but still...

Focussed on finding an exit and knowing that it must come from the woman's conscious mind, he went over the wall while the hounds were howling in anger. Inside the enclosed area, he distinctly noticed the huge chunk of memory towering in front of him. It was called "magical education" and had several smaller blocks hovering around it. He wanted to learn about magic but, given the size of the chunk, it would give him the headache of the century, and his instincts told him to hasten his exit or something very wrong would happen. Still, when he saw a small block hovering nearby, that one called "Mind's active defences and survival", he couldn't prevent himself from seizing it.

Going back on the ground, he found the usual white building hosting the conscious mind, as well as a silo next to it. It confirmed his theory about the silo being linked to the fact one was a wizard. It raised another question: what would happen if he severed the connection between the silo and the building? He didn't have time to guess, though, because, with his new knowledge, he knew that his body was in deadly danger. His heart had ceased to beat when the strand had been severed, and a body couldn't survive a long time without blood coursing through it.

He kicked the door open and barged in the conscious mind, where the woman was in front of him, ready to fight. She didn't have a wand in her mind, though, and couldn't use magic. Harry smirked. That was going to be fast. He jumped at her, helping himself with a bit of levitation, and used the Snake attack to stun her. Once done, he bent over the unconscious body representing her mind, and entered it.

He opened his eyes. Her eyes. And found three persons looking at him worriedly. Two men and a woman. All with revolver holsters dangling inside their open vests. She must be part of their team if they allowed these to show. He made her shake her head.

"I..." he started, surprised at her tone of voice. "Sorry. I have to go. I'll... freshen myself." Harry finished lamely, having heard that line from every woman going to the loo, either in real life or in the movies.

“Need help?” asked the other woman.

Harry jumped at the proposal, before guessing that going to the loo together was perhaps a common female attitude. However, he actually didn't want to go there. It was just to be alone. “No, thanks. I'll be alright.”

He made her stand and walk toward the toilets. When he was sure they weren't watching, she entered the personnel's entry and ran to the reception, going to her knees when she approached the counter from behind. She saw the receptionists doing their usual job, and his body lying inside the hardwood counter, between the trashcan and a computer case. Harry went to his own body in the same way he possessed others, exiting her head in the way, not noticing that she fell down from her kneeling position. Once in his own body, he began by restarting his body functions, reconnecting his mind to the numerous circuits in the white building. He tried not to forget anything, but there were several circuits he actually didn't want to reconnect. Particularly the one labelled "Pain". For a brief moment, he wondered what would happen if he switched the connections between that one and the one beside it, labelled "Pleasure".

He shook his head and left it at that. He could always experiment with his mind later. He had to finish his job, and proceeded in possessing the woman again. This time, she was unconscious and didn't cut the tendril of thoughts Harry now understood as the connections he had just repaired. Taking full control of her again, he made her go to the toilets, put some water in her face and leave to join her companions again. However, before leaving her mind, he modified her memories and particularly her mission. When he left her slumped in her seat, he was smirking. As soon as his dad would appear in the doorway, there would be an interesting sight to behold.

Vernon arrived just as the lobby clock chimed 3pm. As if on cue, the woman stood up and started undressing in front of her stunned colleagues, and Harry used the disturbance to head to his father.

He stopped in his tracks, though, twice shocked.

Vernon Dursley had suffered from severe leg injury and, despite the surgery miracle which allowed him to keep his leg, he was now limping, using a cane to straighten himself. His face was emaciated, surely because of the trouble caused by his whole family disappearance, as well as the subsequent questioning by the agents. After a few months, he had been 'freed' from his job, and the house had been taken back. He had been living half a year in a cramped apartment in Marseilles' low-rates suburbs. Not the happiest place at all. Despite the hardships of his life, the man's eyes were full of hope, darting left and right in search of his wife and kids.

The second shock came in the form of the man following him. A man who Harry thought as dead. A man who had started the whole oriental escapade leading to Petunia.

Jorg.

The man looked older than before, and the folded sleeve hanging on his left side indicated difficult times, but the man looked around with the same kind of hope than Vernon. Unbeknownst to Harry, Jorg had been taken by the enemy secret services, and they had tortured him for information before leaving him to die. He had been brought in a hospital and healed before going to Hanover. He had found his house in shambles, everything which could be salvaged gone, and hadn't seen his mother in the nearest hospital. He had then remembered Harry's name and had gone to France to meet Vernon.

The two men had lived together since then, one helping the other. And when Petunia had called, Jorg had held to that tiny speck of hope that his mother might be alive as well.

Harry shook his head, clearing it. The disturbance caused by the witch's strip tease wouldn't last long, and he had to bring the men outside. He resumed walking toward them and addressed them.

"Harry told me to bring you to him."

That sure got the men's attention and they followed him outside, into a cab. Two seconds after the cab left, the agents finally calmed the witch and they resumed their now useless wait.

A bit later, in a hotel room...

The two women opened the room's door, talking animatedly.

"It's the last time I come here as a tourist!" said Petunia, entering the room. "They were acting discourteously!"

"I saw that, Petunia," answered Ulrike. "But you'll agree that there were other places to visit. Besides, it's not everyday that one holds the largest synod of the century, and they had to prepare."

"Of course there were. But I so wanted to see the chapel. I..."

She stopped, noticing the open communication door. And the people in the next room.

"VERNON!" she shrieked, dropping her bags and practically jumping at her husband. It was a good thing that he was already seated on the bed, or he would have fallen down. Ulrike followed, but Harry took her hand, motioning her and the others back in the other room. Once there, he gently addressed her.

"Ulrike. I know I uprooted you, but you revealed yourself a strong woman. Someone arrived with Vernon, and I just wanted to warn you about him."

"Who? Who is it?"

"It's your son."

She frantically looked around. "My son? Jorg? Where is-"

"I'm here, mother." said Jorg from the connection door to the other room.

She fainted.

Same place, hours later...

Harry's throat was sore. He was sure he had never spoken that long before. Now, though, everyone knew about almost everything. Petunia learnt about the details of her imprisonment. Harry learnt about her feelings during that period, as well as Gunter's death and Jorg's subsequent escape from the enemy spies. Vernon learnt about the whole trip. Jorg learnt about his mother "awakening" and she learnt about his job. They had had their meal in one of their hotel rooms, and the other kids were now sleeping soundly.

"You understand, then, that we can't stay here." Harry said.

Several tired nods answered him.

"From here," he continued, "we can either go north to Switzerland, a quite neutral country, or back to the African continent, hiding like we did before. We can also buy a boat and leave by the seas. What do you think?"

"The boat sounds fun, but who'll buy it?" asked Jorg. "We'll need a large one, and I know I didn't leave enough money to get one."

Harry looked at Ulrike and blushed. "Well... I always get a knack at negotiating prices. And I also... asked Ulrike... to draw the maximum she could from her bank accounts. I saw... well, that was in movies, but the spies always get their target because they use their credit card."

"True." simply said Jorg, before returning to a pensive mode.

"Perhaps we can settle a bit before moving?" asked Petunia. "I'm quite wary of travelling, personally."

"If Harry's right, dear, we should at least move from Rome." answered Vernon. "Besides, Mr Lakeson... you remember him? He was my boss at Grunnings. Well, he spent his holidays in Geneva and always told us about it afterwards. Seems a charming country to me. And if it's neutral..."

“Well, there are always ways,” said Jorg, “but it’s a more secure location than here. Especially if you said they are in town already.”

Harry nodded, before yawning. “So,” he said, “everyone agrees? Switzerland tomorrow?”

Another round of nods later, everyone went to bed and slept thoroughly.

To be continued in next chapter: Clockworks and Sand...

Well, they aren’t back home yet.
They don’t have one anyway.
They will move again, I bet,
Once the agents get their way.

Chapter 7 – Clockworks and Sand

posted July 7th, 2005

They left in the morning, once again buying a large vehicle for a good price – a minibus, this time. On the way to Geneva, they discussed about the nosy agents and decided to do something to be less traceable. The first thing was their names. Except Mustafa, all of them were known by their name, and, if they were going to stay a long time, they had to change these. After a brainstorming pause over lunch, they renamed Petunia and Vernon as Grace and Benjamin Calder, James, Eva, and Maureen were going to be Jason, Emma, and Kathleen – respectively. Jorg and Ulrike chose George and Victoria Thomson. They even agreed to have Harry trifle with their minds a little so that they wouldn't call the wrong name at the wrong time. Of course, Harry assured them that he would still have their original names somewhere in his own mind. The other difficult decision had been about the family structure. If the spies were searching for a family with four kids their ages, they would be quick to find them despite their changed names. Petunia and Vernon, now answering to Grace and Benjamin, had reluctantly agreed to the fact that Harry wasn't going to bear their name, even if it wasn't Dursley anymore. He would be Harold Thomson, so as to still have a link between the two parts of the group.

On the way, too, Vernon gave Harry a letter, telling him that he had had to ask the postal services for it since he had left the large house a long time before. Harry looked at the writing and the stamp, and immediately understood why he received it. It was because he had asked for it. He opened it, and quickly read the message written in Arabic, to his father's astonishment. He nodded, and put the letter aside, intending to destroy it at the next opportunity – no need to start a fire in a moving vehicle, unless it's a funeral drakkar. Apparently, the scarred and bearded wizard who had ordered their death had been caught by his own killers, and was now pushing daisies, or whatever plants there are in deserts.

They arrived in Geneva on the 20th, in the morning. Once again, Harry got miscellaneous information from the locals' minds, such as the town map, and the places to visit. The first thing they had to do was finding a house, and they went to the first real estate agency to

look for a house in a quiet neighbourhood. It had to be small and innocuous, while being large enough to host all of them. After all their adventures together, Petunia and Ulrike weren't ready to part ways just now, and it was easier for Harry to watch over one house rather than two. After a lot of candidates, they found the perfect one, in Lausanne Street – which coincidentally led to Lausanne – and asked to visit it.

Situated near the Parc Mon Repos, the house was looking over said park's greenery to Lake Geneva. It didn't have a garden but it had a direct access to the park, as well as a nice private terrace on the third floor, containing a small 10 feet by 20 swimming pool. With "only" six bedrooms and three bathrooms, it didn't have enough rooms for each of them, contrarily to their large house in China. However, used to their smaller house in Beausoleil, the Dursleys only needed three bedrooms for the six of them. The subterranean garage could hold three cars, or a large number of bicycles. Harry cautiously expanded his senses, and didn't find anything abnormal in the surroundings. All in all, it was perfect. And expensive. They started to discuss the price and eventually shook hands over an interesting 15 percent.

They then went to find a bank, where they asked for the manager in order to open several accounts. In the private office, Harry had no problem convincing the man of the identities of everyone present despite their papers stating otherwise, and four accounts were created: one for "Victoria", one for "Georges", one for Mustafa, and the last for "Grace" and "Benjamin". According to the plan, they then stored a part of Ulrike's remaining money on each of the accounts, the largest part being for the joint account. For each of the accounts, the manager set the authorized debit limit to a ridiculously large value. Six credit cards would also be sent to their address, so that Petunia and Vernon could both access their account, and Harry as well in case of problems. While giving out several booklets where were explained the means to access one's account, the manager had also confirmed that no foreign power could force the bank to forbid access to an account. Harry finally convinced the man that Vernon was having a well-paid job – something they would take care of later – and that buying a house worth a million Swiss francs wasn't going to be a problem. The bank manager complied and used his greenish computer screen to validate the mortgage, bypassing several security

screens with the appropriate passwords. The printer nearby made some screeching noises, as if it was reluctant, and the bank check was given to Vernon to get the house. When they left the office, the manager had conveniently forgotten everything. And the real estate agent who received the check an hour later also forgot about them all after handing them the keys.

After unloading their scarce luggage from the van into their brand-new house and driving to the local mall, they split. Petunia and Ulrike went to select some paint and furniture, while Mustafa was leading the kids toward the games shop. Harry went with Vernon to buy another car, as well as several bicycles. Vernon chose a convertible Mercedes 560SL Roadster, and Harry, because of his guilty feeling of getting everything for free, didn't snatch the car from the manager's mind. Instead, he sat with Vernon and the man, and they discussed about prices and payment, finally agreeing on a 35 percent discount and an interest-free loan. Vernon was flabbergasted at the man's willingness about these figures, but he knew that Harry was able to do several interesting things, and that must be one of them. He didn't take the car yet, because he had to load the bikes in the van, drop them home, and come back later to get the others. During the man's trip, Harry went to see the ladies, and did with their purchases the same thing he did with Vernon's new car, arranging for a home delivery as well. After that, they recovered Mustafa, happily buying puppets for the girls and electronic games for James. They went to the food court next, where Jorg and James discussed about computers while the others merely rested their minds from the morning activities.

The day wasn't finished, though, as the afternoon saw the women buying everything they could think of in clothing, while Jorg and Mustafa went home to wait for their incoming furniture. During this, Vernon brought the kids to the local school. The Headmistress, a severe-looking old woman clad in grey, was curious about why they wanted to start the term now. Harry had to convince her magically because she wouldn't accept Vernon's stuttered excuses about stranded desert caravans – even if it was nothing but the truth. Once it was done, Vernon was handed a schedule of the school where their daily, weekly, and yearly program was presented, and the kids were dispatched in their class, the Headmistress introducing them to the

other pupils. During the walk from one class to another, Harry got inside the stern woman's head and recuperated the school's plans. He didn't want to be lost on his first day.

That evening, Harry and the adults had a discussion about who was going to work, how, where, and for how much. Vernon, thanks to his experience with the nightclub – despite it being cut short because of his attack and subsequent wound – didn't need anything in particular, as long as it involved public relations. Petunia and Ulrike indicated that they preferred to take care of the large house, but that several activities could interest them. Namely, everything having to do with decoration and manual activities. Jorg could work with a computer, and Mustafa indicated he loved to take care of animals. In the following days, Harry helped each of them getting something to do: Vernon got a spot in their own bank; Jorg found a place as a programmer; Mustafa began to work for a horse centre nearby; and the women were included in the local circle of housewives interested in decoration.

After the hectic program of the first days, the group settled, and slowly entered a peaceful routine, only broken by the usual holidays. For Christmas, they all went to Sankt Moritz where they could learn how to ski on the mythic Winter Olympics tracks. Everyone loved it, especially the children, and they decided to schedule an encore for the next holiday period which was Easter. Because of their sudden interest in that sport, though, they also decided to spend most of their free time in between in the ski stations around Geneva. In the warmer days, they also used the Lake Geneva to practise water sports or to just have fun.

And they were really having fun. So much fun, in fact, that Harry got sloppy a few times, beginning to use his magic in public places. It was always discreet and not very visible, but he did it nonetheless.

And several persons noticed it.

During Easter vacation, a group of scientists from the CERN was having a seminary in Sankt Moritz, and two of them, accomplished physicians and talented skiers as well, noticed the speed of one of the skiers. The looked as the small body was going faster than the

gentle slope allowed for someone of his bulk, and started to discuss it. The others in the group started to look as well, but the boy, perhaps sensing that he was observed, had returned to a normal speed, and the physicians finished their meal talking about another subject dear to them: quantum dynamics. The short exchange between the scientists hadn't been totally lost, though, as someone was dining near their table. Someone whose binoculars were never far from hand. Someone who had been put on forced vacation after agent Jones' impromptu departure. Someone whose real name was Carla Mohavez but who called herself Carlita. Someone, finally, who recognized Harry Dursley's features in the boy she caught in her binoculars.

She left the table suddenly, her meal hardly touched. Some things in life were more important than food.

A few weeks afterwards...

The commando looked around and at their leader. This time, their leader was a woman, and their target a boy sleeping in a house on the other side of Geneva's harbour. Despite the unusual mission, they had been told that the boy was dangerous, but that he was to be taken alive at all costs. Alive, but unconscious. They had also been told that some of them might turn traitorous suddenly, but that it was part of the mission to get them too. It had really been a weird briefing.

Now, though, they were waiting for the signal to launch the boat to full speed. When the radio came to life suddenly, they knew that the time had come. It was 3am, that April 21st, 1991.

After crossing the waters silently, the ship accosted the darkened park and the black-clad men disembarked, three of them getting their long-range rifles out of their case. All the commando's weapons were equipped with soporific ammunition and silencers. The three sharpshooters quickly strolled through the park to get into position, and the seven other members waited the required five minutes before launching forwards. Three of them took position around the house door while the other four used ninja-like equipment to climb the walls of the nearby houses, intending to enter the house by the terrace.

At the light signal from the boat, they all entered at the same time, as silently as possible, using gadgets that even professional burglars didn't have in their list to Father Christmas. Their intelligence had observed the household for days and they knew where their target was. The door was closed. One of them took hold of the handle and opened the door.

It creaked.

Someone woke up suddenly.

Pandemonium ensued.

Three hours later, back at the base...

"Congratulations, agent Mohavez!" the man's voice was dripping with sarcasm. "Three of my best men out of service, one of them having even forgotten his own name! Can you explain, at least?" the Marines colonel wasn't happy. That CIA agent had used his men in an obviously badly prepared mission to retrieve what? A mere civilian boy?

"Sir, I'm not allowed to talk about it, sir." she said to the man.

The colonel huffed, and left the room.

Once alone, Carlita reflected about the mission. She, in turn, didn't care about the wounded men. The dangers had been clearly indicated in their briefing, and they had acted accordingly. The reports from them hadn't been clear, but she knew that the infamous boy had awoken at some point, and some of the men had targeted others, resulting in a quick fight. However, between the seven of them, two had had the presence of mind to disregard the brawl and fire hypodermic syringes to their target, and the boy was now slumped in the retraining bed, kept under the same soporific cocktail through perfusion.

He was going home. Her home.

In a place disconnected from the world...

“Uh oh. I’m screwed.”

The sentence could have been from a cartoon character in a funny although deadly situation. In Harry’s state, though, it wasn’t funny. He remembered being shot at, the resulting sleepy sensation, and the subsequent escape to his mind to disconnect his body from his mind. He didn’t want whatever by-product they had shot him with to impair his reasoning. He only left the heartbeat and breathing connections up. He couldn’t escape his mind, though, because a part of his magic depended on his body and it was deeply asleep at that moment. Not having anything else to do, he explored his memories, and found several interesting things.

The first one concerned the memory block he had imported from the witch in Rome, labelled "Mind’s active defences and survival." It was floating alone, not connected to anything yet, and surely contained interesting things. Browsing it, Harry learnt about the different techniques of the mind, unconsciously linking the new memory to his conscious mind. He also learnt that the witch was named Sarah and had learnt about all that in a special school for American witches: the Salem Institute.

Schools. Magical schools. The wizard in Luxor, Bill, had talked about them, too. Should he attend one? Bill had told him about ‘the next year’ when he had told him his age. Was eleven a special milestone for wizards? Was he going to find a school by himself or would someone like Professor Xavier find him first?

So many questions... nobody to ask them to...

A school friend had lent him several comics over the months, and Harry had thought their description of psychic powers were on par with what he was feeling. And he liked the concept of someone responsible, like the aforementioned professor, building a school for ‘gifted’ students – what an understatement! For the moment, thanks to his versatility, he now imagined himself like a smaller version of Jane Grey, the mutant with telepathy and telekinesis. But he knew he had other powers. Bored, he decided to go in his memories as far as he could, listing his powers and naming them in the process.

He could alter his physical appearance, as he had done in Zheng Zhou, As Sulaymaniyah, and Rome. He didn't know about limits for that one. He reflected about it, and thought that he could perhaps change his size and bulk also. He had remarked, though, that trying to do something really new with his magic didn't seem to work anymore. He could experiment and expand on existing talents, but he sensed he would have difficulties getting new ones. He remembered in the Hilton, when he had unsuccessfully wanted to become invisible. Perhaps his magic was stabilizing? Perhaps that was because of that milestone of eleven years approaching? Perhaps that was why the magical children couldn't be taught before? He shrugged the questions aside and continued his explorations.

He could also heal himself, provided he knew the structure of the injured part, like he had done with his knee. He instantly resolved to absorb a doctor's mind in the near future, in order to be able to heal quickly and efficiently the next time. Perhaps he could heal others, too? He remembered healing James' arm and supposed that he'd have to experiment...

In the list of powers he already had, came the very interesting ability to pass through walls. He remembered doing it in Beausoleil when he had found that he had been checked upon by secret service agents. That would be interesting when he would wake up. If he would wake up.

That was not all. There were others, but Harry suddenly stopped inventorying his powers, because he had reached a barrier. His mind was admirably sorted, and he was able to consciously access any part of it, and any memory, but he couldn't go as far as his very early childhood. He couldn't reach his first birthday, and had the uneasy feeling that it was linked with the dark shroud now safely ensconced in the stone turret flanking his castle-type mind defence.

Bored again, he checked his mind's connections with his body to see if it was able to wake up. Upon getting a negative answer, he sighed mentally, before parsing Sarah's memories of mind abilities, resolving to improve his defences some more.

A week later...

In the seventh underground level of the brand new Headquarters building of the Central Intelligence Agency, three persons were discussing quite heatedly.

“Well, I want to know what’s wrong with him. It has been a week already, and I haven’t seen a sign of wakefulness.” said a thin man with a white lab coat. His age was reflected by a white hair and beard, and wire-framed spectacles rested at the end of his nose. His badge shown that he was named Philip Furnier, and that he was here as a doctor.

“What do you mean, "no sign"? Of course he’s sleeping, with the dose of somniferous product we pump into his veins, he shouldn’t wake for a long time. I’m more interested in his mind, though.” said Carla Mohavez.

“You’ll have to wait for a miracle for this to happen.” answered the doctor coldly. “I recorded almost no activity, whatever the level tested. The only thing I get is a peak at beta level every now and then, but it shouldn’t be possible! I mean, if the boy is asleep, he should broadcast alpha-theta or delta wavelengths, but on these spectrums, I get nothing. Clinically, he is in a deep coma.”

“Furnier, you’ll have to explain.” said the third person there. Kevin "B.B." Lambert was a large man, whose demeanour indicated a martial arts addict, hence his nickname: "Black Belt". And he was the special agent in liaison with their project and the White House. As such, he was superior to whoever worked on this in the place.

The addressed doctor swallowed, before explaining the functioning of the human brain and the sleep cycles and patterns. He tried to keep his explanations and words as simple as possible, and succeeded somewhat. ‘I should record that.’ he thought. ‘I never explained it so well.’

However, it still went over Kevin’s head. The man, visibly not a science nerd, huffed at the wiry doctor and, turning suddenly, he left

him and the woman. At the elevator's door, he turned and yelled that he needed a report on his desk by the end of the day.

"It's already after the end of the day." muttered Philip a short time afterwards, looking gloomily at the clock above the now-closed doors. "This boy isn't my only case, and if I continue to work overtime like this, I'll... I'll..."

He suddenly remembered the person in front of his and looked up, blushing. "Sorry, it wasn't meant to be said aloud."

She chuckled, though, but her gaze stayed serious. "In this case, you should watch your mouth. Especially in the new building. Now, I want to check if I understood everything from your handy explanation. The subject is in coma?"

"Yes. I'd say that if I hadn't monitored all his mind activity levels for so long. You see, the Beta level is associated to concentration, Delta to sleep, and Alpha and Theta are in between. Even in the deepest sleep we should still record some activity on Delta level. Only people in coma get the kind of graph the boy has. But the peaks in Beta, it's... it's almost like..." the doctor stopped, turning to look at the window behind which a boy was sleeping, monitors around his body and the needles secured to his arms, which were, like his legs, firmly attached to the bed. On his left arm, the soporific drug was delivered while on its right, it was a cocktail of nutrients.

"Yes?" asked Carlita. "It's almost like what?"

Philip said something, but she had to make him repeat, because it was so low she hadn't heard it first.

"It's as if he is out of his mind, only coming back in to check from time to time."

Another week later...

Agent Kevin Lambert was generally a happy man. He loved his job, especially when he was sent to the field. He loved his physical

training and the reaction he got from the female population wherever he went. He loved his country, ready to defend it to the death. Even and especially if it involved some form of physical attack against a designated enemy.

However, he had been recently promoted and, something he hadn't thought about when he had accepted, is that it involved office work, something he disliked profoundly. He had been affected to a project he knew nothing about, with people who often used words with more than three syllables. The only thing interesting was that he was often talking with the President. Privately. Few persons could boast about having a little chit-chat with the Big Ole' One. He couldn't boast about it, though, as the whole project had been labelled Top Secret by the President himself. And, despite liking the fact that he was chatting with the White House current resident, he didn't like the content, as it was linked to his office job. He hid his reluctance well enough, though, and continued to work.

Today was one of those days where he would visit the Oval Office again. The conversation which took place, though, jarred the habits he had taken since starting with the boy, two weeks before. The President wanted to see the boy. Up and about. Alive and kicking. Awake.

Damn.

And that doctor who spoke those strange words! He had tried to read the first report he got from the thin and wiry old man, but had failed to understand the first three pages. He only rifled through them, now. But one thing was certain: the woman agent didn't want to stop the IV. She was afraid. He slammed the accelerator angrily, not heeding the fact that he was cutting through several incoming vehicles' way.

Afraid? Of a mere boy? He pictured the boy's face for a second, before chortling. How could one be afraid of such a weakling? He would show her! And then, he would bed her. He smirked. He was sure that the two of them were compatible for a little game between the sheets. A red traffic light allowed his mind to wander into the kind of thoughts which make a story rating soar.

Distracted by his thoughts, agent Lambert didn't see the quite large man in the car nearby point a stick at him and mutter a particular word, concentrate for a moment, and stowing the stick back in his Hawaiian shirt afterwards. When the light turned green, agent Lambert drove forward to enter the famous interstate 66, heading to his Headquarters, not realizing he was followed by a rather nondescript car driven by a curious man.
That afternoon...

Harry had been bored before, but now he was getting real difficult. He had visited every memory he had, sorting them into appropriate chunks. He had revisited his defences, turning his stone walls to white. He also had created creatures to roam around it. These creatures would never harm him, but any trespasser would have severe difficulties passing through. He didn't know how they were called, because Sarah's memories had been incomplete about the creatures' name, but they had contained a precise description of them, as well as a comment: 'too difficult to manage – will stay with the hounds.' All Harry knew was that these were four-legged winged reptilian creatures able to breathe fire. In the long time he had passed in his own mind, he had had enough time to create four of them, which were now roaming his domain. His mind.

Several times, he had checked on his body, but it was still out. He couldn't stay longer than a mere second, because the soporific product which was coursing through his veins was strong and he didn't want to be sleeping in a potentially dangerous environment.

After listing for the umpteenth time the things he'd like to do once out, he checked on his body again.

And got a surprise.

The soporific's potency was lowering!

In the safety of his own mind, he danced in joy, doing a few cartwheels in the process. After a few seconds, he stopped and reflected about his options. As soon as his body was alright, he would have to scan his surroundings, trying to find a secluded spot to regroup, and going through the walls toward that spot.

He checked his body more often now, and started to hear voices around it.

“...is waking...” said a feminine voice. It had a tad of uncertainty about it.

“...see that graph? He’s...” said a high-pitched male voice. Harry didn’t know why, but he imagined a bespectacled old man speaking. He christened him Mr Nerd.

“...know, I know. I’m still not sure it’s a good...” answered the woman.

“...on’t worry, sweetheart, it’ll be fi...” another male voice, deeper and sounding confident, although Harry had an immediate dislike for it. Harry dubbed him Mr Spy.

Three persons. Two men, one woman.

“...ow about what he’s able to do? He has...” said the woman.

“...ease stay quiet? I’m trying to underst...” that was Mr Nerd.

“...can it, old fellow. He wakes up, no strange...” Mr Spy answered.

“...give you ‘old fellow!’ Never before have I...” was Mr Nerd’s indignant answer.

“...about him is so special? I don’t understand.” asked Mr Spy.

The woman answered. “You don’t seem to understand anything about...”

Harry felt more and more alive. He was starting to hear complete sentences. In a moment, he would be able to...

Wait!

What's this stinging sensation on his neck?

His keepers were gentle enough to inform him about it, although they did so unknowingly.

"...don't think he's dangerous enough to have that syringe stuck in his neck, baby." said Mr Spy.

"Stop calling me baby or I'll have you for harassment. For your information, we needed ten fully trained Marines to get a hold on that boy. Five of them got several wounds, and one of them doesn't even remember his own name."

'Wow,' thought Harry, 'ten Marines? I didn't know they were that many.' he quieted his thoughts, though, because what she said after was of a vital interest for him.

"...and this syringe," the woman was saying, "contains a concentrate of the same soporific mixture we used on him already. Anything strange, and I inject it. I can't risk anyone's life, especially the President's."

'The President's?' reflected Harry. 'Which President? The President?' The woman's voice was vaguely familiar. He instinctively frowned.

"I think he's going to wake up soon." said Mr Nerd. "It had gone full-Beta for a few minutes."

"Harry?" asked the woman gently.

Ah! As if someone could be gentle while having a syringe ready to inject something into your bloodstream.

"Wake up!" said Mr Spy brusquely. Obviously, the man wasn't keen on children. Harry suspected that he would never have one.

He played along, and opened his eyes slightly. The light was so intense, though, that he closed them, hoarsely speaking. "Too... bright."

"That's why he's dangerous?" asked Mr Spy with a laughing undertone. "He's a gremlin?"

Harry frowned. He didn't know about the movie, and couldn't think about why the man had called him that way. The woman knew about it, though.

"Very funny." she said in a sarcastic voice. "Go fetch him two glasses of water instead of citing children movies, I think he's thirsty."

"Sure he won't transform? It's after midnight!" said Mr Spy in a mockingly alarmed tone, before fetching the required water.

While somebody – surely Mr Nerd – turned the projector away from his face, Harry felt the glass reach his lips and quickly drank it. He didn't know why the woman had asked for two glasses, but the answer came quickly. When the water reached his stomach, which had been empty for two weeks, the organ reacted quite violently and he retched, expelling the water quite violently.

"Now, now." said the woman gently, offering him the second glass while putting the syringe back to its place after Harry's brusque movement. "Here's another. Should go better this time."

Harry drank again, unused to the metallic sensation in his mouth.

He felt better.

And ready to move.

Looking at the bottom of his glass, Harry remembered how he had moved from his house in Beausoleil to the agents' hideaway. The memory, painstakingly sorted for the occasion and cleaned of any external influence during his two weeks of isolation, allowed him to act immediately.

“Hey!” exclaimed Mr Nerd who was looking at the monitoring devices. “What’s this curv...”

Too late. He ‘switched reality’. He knew that was a lame terminology, but he didn’t have anything else. One moment, he was lying on a quite hard bed with people around him. The next, everything around him went gaseous, and he knew he could move through the people, the walls, everything. He also knew that, whatever his physical state might be, he moved thanks to his mind. He could move really quickly in that way. Perhaps he could go real far.

He was still hearing his captors, although it was as if he was hearing them in a wind-beaten environment. The voices weren’t distinct anymore, and some words were missing.

“What were... ing?”

“...graph went wide, before stoppin...”

“...put a tracker on him?”

“I didn’t think he wou...”

Harry didn’t understand everything, and decided to try something to solve that. As he didn’t need to stay concentrate to stay in the gaseous ‘parallel universe,’ he supposed he could do something else while being there. He concentrated on the fuzzy contour he thought belonged to Mr Nerd and successfully entered the man’s mind. Harry quieted his surprise and explored around. The man’s memories confirmed his initial thought of him being a doctor. He was working for the CIA on sometimes dubious subjects. Like him. Harry didn’t have time to explore much, as he was still hearing the desperate voices of the two other occupants, and he didn’t know how long he could stay in that vaporous state.

He simply selected two memories, about Anatomy in general and about his own medical state, and copied them into his mind, before removing the man’s memory of anything related to him. Switching to

Carlita's mind, he learnt that his family and friends hadn't been moved from their location in Switzerland, but that a close guard was kept on their house. He repeated the process of erasing her memories of himself. After doing the same with Mr Spy, he learnt the maps of the two Headquarters buildings, the old and the new, as well as the White House's and several spots one could use to enter said buildings discreetly.

Trying to quench his burgeoning headache, Harry decided to quickly separate from his captors. Using his current shape and the abilities it offered, he passed through several walls and occupied rooms until he found a broomshed in which he could become tangible again. However, he quickly discovered that, despite his mind being in perfect condition, his body wasn't. He crumbled on the floor in an undignified heap, taking several brooms and buckets in the process.

The sound wasn't missed by several people in the nearby corridors, though, and Harry heard several footsteps nearing the cupboard. He focussed, and returned to his ethereal form, just as the door opened. The two employees who were facing him didn't see anything that a broom cupboard which content was disturbed, and came to the normal conclusion that someone must have stored them in an unbalanced way. They didn't see, or feel, the anguished boy staring back at them from his ghostly state, and closed the door.

Harry sighed. He would have to think of another way to get out of the building. He sat on a large overturned bucket to think, but didn't even start thinking. In his state, his rear had passed through the plastic object, and he was sitting on the cupboard floor. He contemplated this, and reflected about his state. He could pass through walls, why couldn't he pass through floors and ceilings? As soon as the thought hit him, he decided to try. Concentrating on levitating his ethereal form, he successfully lifted himself a foot from the floor, two feet, three...

Now that he knew he could fly, he accelerated, and shot through the seven floors in one go, not even registering their content. He found himself in the air, looking down at the smoky shape of the building he had been held into. Now that he was free, he thought about himself. His headache was growing, and his body was weak. He had to find a

place to rest, at least temporarily. He knew that, once the newly-integrated memories would have had time to soak in, he would feel better. The aspirin would have made the pain bearable, though. He couldn't even disconnect that particular pain from his mind as he had done with his body, because it was linked to the mind itself.

Discerning an expanse of trees nearby, he went there, hid behind several ranks of them and under a bush or two, and returned to the real world. The sum of experiences he had got from the moment he had woken up was suddenly too much and, finally able to, he fell into unconsciousness.

Later...

Harry woke up in a bed, and turned around a few times before remembering the event before his slumber. How could he find himself in a bed? He jumped out of it, quite relieved by the lack of restraining measures.

As soon as he was upright, the door opened and a large man entered. He looked in his thirties, and was clad in a Hawaiian shirt showing a deep tan.

"Hi, dude." he said in a cheerful voice.

Harry looked at him in wonder, and the man shrugged. "What? It's all I get for my pain?" he asked, with laughter underlying his words.

"Who are you? And where I am?" asked Harry.

The man rolled his eyes. "Of course. The usual questions. 'Who are we, and where are we headed?'" He chuckled. "Forget I said this. I'm Josh, Harry, and we're in my apartment in College Park."

"College Park? You live in a college? And how do you know my name?"

"No, silly. College Park is a town north of Washington D.C. and is named that way because it hosts the University of Maryland's

campus. I live here because I teach here. Sports. And as how I know your name... let's say I have my ways. But it's not what's important. Come on, I can talk over the breakfast I'm sure you are needing."

As if on cue, Harry's stomach growled. Blushing, the boy followed his rescuer into the lobby. And he got a surprise. He hadn't paid attention to the bedroom but, seeing the lobby and the adjoining kitchen, he wondered how a sport teacher could earn enough to own such a large place. Several large pictures hanged from the walls, most of them about islands, beaches, and high ocean waves. On the side, a large television was displaying the current news about the Bangladesh humanitarian operations, followed by a discussion about the upcoming speech of the Queen of England at the Congress.

However, even if the apartment was large, it was scattered with strange looking material and bizarrely-shaped planks. Or was it...? Humming, Josh prepared a large helping of fruits, milk, and cereals, and put everything on the table in front of Harry. While the boy ate slowly, to ease his stomach's work, the man explained more.

"I... got the info that you were detained, but I found you outside of the building, hidden in a patch of trees. Judging by your state, you mustn't have eaten in a long time. Were you mistreated?"

Harry stopped eating and seemed thoughtful. "No."

"What do you mean?"

"I was kept unconscious. They didn't want me to..." He stopped speaking and looked away for a second. He then shrugged, before returning to his meal. He was famished, after all.

The man looked at him in compassion, before heading to his own bedroom, closing the door. While he was eating, Harry heard the man speaking alone and suspected that he was on the phone. He didn't pay attention to the conversation until he caught a word which awoke his paranoid nature. He listened intently, but the man was already at the end of his conversation.

“-from those muggles.”

“ ... ”

“So, you agree?”

“ ... ”

“Well, seeya then.”

“ ... ”

“Bye, babe.”

And he hung up.

When the man returned to the lobby, holding a bag, he was surprised to see Harry completely still, looking straight at his eyes. He felt a swirl in his thoughts and involuntarily remembered his name, job, usual activities, and the reasons behind him taking the boy in, as well as the content of the phone call and the identity of the woman he had called. When the swirl stopped, both of them were in the same position, but Harry wasn't looking at him anymore, he was eating his cereals again. 'What happened?' the man thought, before shrugging, his good-natured self coming up again.

“I just called a friend.” he said, while emptying the bag on the table in front of Harry.

“O'ay.” mumbled Harry through his cereals. He swallowed his mouthful. “What is this?” he asked, pointing at the wildly coloured clothes on the table.

“Clothes, dude.”

“I'd say! No, really.”

“You ain’t got a cloth, dude, so I picked my old ones. They’ll fit you, I think.”

“What’s with the colours?”

Josh grinned. “That’s Hawaiian, man. That’s the uniform of us surfers.” the man was doing a strange motion with his hand, and Harry didn’t know what it was until he fetched the information from the man’s mind – as well as the whole slab of memory related to surfing and another one related to their location. Now he understood the meaning of the paraphernalia scattered around the large apartment.

“Sweet!” he said, and immediately tried the shirt on.

While he was looking at himself in the mirror, Josh spoke again. “Harry, the friend I called... she’ll be there soonly. We’ll have a look around. You okay with that?”

“Hmmm hmmm.” the boy nodded absently.

“Her name is Alison. Alison Potter.”

Harry looked up sharply. He knew about her name from the man’s memories, but, strangely, when he had pronounced the name, it acquired a particular substance. It called for something in him. He was curious, and asked the man to repeat the woman’s name a few times. Curious, but not prying, the man did so while Harry went to his mind to check where the resonance was. To his dismay, it was in the separate turret hosting the dark shroud. He knew that something important was there, but he was still afraid of it. In no other mind had he witnessed such a strange occurrence. Not even in the other wizards. Not in Bill’s, not in Sarah’s, and not in Josh’s. Yes, he knew that Josh was a wizard, and that was how he had gotten that large loft. Harry wasn’t the only one to use his powers for comfort.

Thinking back to the shroud and its link to his inability to explore his memory before the tender age of one, he reflected that he would have to ask his parents about this. Perhaps they could explain about his early childhood. In the meantime...

He opened his eyes. To see Josh's worried face in front of his.

"Dude, are you okay? D'you need something?"

"Ah. Err... Yeah. I mean... No, I'm okay... Man." Harry answered.

"Great!" smiled the man, before going to serve himself a glass of Coke.

"Outrageous." said Harry under his breath.

"Whaddaya say?" asked Josh from the depth of his fridge.

"Nuthin'" answered Harry automatically. 'Why in the hell did I pick his language pack too?' he thought.

A short time later...

When the woman showed herself at the apartment door, Harry immediately liked her. Like Josh, she was easy-going and funny, and wore Hawaiian shirts too, although a dozen sizes smaller. He just browsed her mind quickly and noticed that she was a witch too. Unlike Josh, though, her mind defences seemed solid, and Harry didn't want to break through them as it would certainly raise her suspicion. Besides, she was a friend of his host. He quickly got out of her mind.

'Well... perhaps I'll get a bit of interesting information on the way.' he thought.

They quickly arrived in the mall, where Harry was surprised. He was surprised at the large choice of shops. He was surprised at the mall population and their attitude. And he was surprised that both Alison and Josh were allowing him to tag along, asking his advice in several of their purchases of the day. It was at that moment that Harry remembered that the university campus at College Park had been quite empty.

They were planning their vacation!

They paused around a drink, and Harry had insisted to get a tea despite Alison's warning. When he took the first sip, he understood her meaning and almost spitted it back into the paper cup. It wasn't tea, he thought, or he wasn't British. She smiled and gave him a banknote so that he could get himself a Coke instead. Once comfortably sipping the liquid, Harry decided to ask about the near future.

"Josh? Alison?"

"Yeah?" they both answered at the same time.

"Well... first, thank you for taking me in. It's really kind of you, and-"

"Please, Harry!" answered Josh. "Any dude would do the same for a dude like you."

"I thank you nonetheless. And thank you both, for being fun and easy-going. You accepted me and included me without question."

Both of them looked at him with wide eyes. "Same here, Harry." said Alison. "Anyone would have done the same."

"Okay. Now, what do you want to do?" he asked.

Josh smiled. "Well, continue shopping, and then get a bite and go back? Or the other way around: go back and then get a bite? Which do you prefer?"

"I meant later. I don't think you want me tagging along forever. Especially during your vacation. I'm sure you both share certain activities I'm not invited in." said Harry.

They both blushed, and he smirked. "I meant surfing!"

That elicited a round of laughter, and they slowly returned serious. "Well, that particular activity, you can go with us, Harry." said Josh.

He looked surprised. "You mean it? Where?"

"Not here, that's for sure!" said Alison, smirking.

Josh thought about it. "We have scheduled a two weeks vacation in the Samoa Islands. The weather will be perfect and the waves awesome!"

The man had a passionate glint in his eyes, which transmitted to Alison, and both began to describe their favourite sport with much gesticulation, to Harry's laughter. Their exuberance wasn't to the liking of a grumpy couple of overly large customers, though, and they complained to the fast food employees, who transmitted the protest to the agitated surfers. The three of them laughed, but left the premises all the same, followed by the satisfied gaze of the two sticklers. However, just as they were leaving, Harry turned back and noticed something else in the couple's eyes. Thinking about it on their way back, he was sure that it was jealousy.

Once back in Josh's flat, they slumped on the sofas around the den and laughed again.

"So." started Josh again. "You gonna join us, Harry?"

His good-natured smile faltered when Harry's expression darkened.

"I..." the boy swallowed. "Thank you. Both of you. But I can't go."

"Okay, dude. No sweat." said Josh. "You can, you can. You can't, you can't. I'm not prying."

"Thanks." said Harry. "I will return to my family, then. I guess they are going to be angsty that I left. It has been..." he looked at a tear-out calendar pinned near the door. "...two weeks already."

"Okay. You left your parents, explored the place, got caught by the big bad guys, escaped, I found you and you return to your parents." Josh summed up. "No sweat, I tell ya. You want me to drive you over there?"

Harry smirked. Not only the man was wrong in his assumption, but the thought of his used van driving to Switzerland was fun in itself.

“It’s partly true.” he said. “But you can’t drive me there.”

“How so?” asked Alison.

“They live in Switzerland.”

If Harry had wanted a way to quiet them, he had found it. Both of them were looking at him with wide eyes.

“I can’t really explain. I need to go there quickly, though, because the ‘big bad guys’ are keeping a watch on the house, and I don’t know in how much time they’ll realize my departure.”

“Do you need help, Harry?” asked Alison, who seemed to have recovered faster than Josh.

Harry smiled. Help travelling? He had been doing that for a whole year already. “No, thank you.”

“But... how are you going to buy a plane ticket to there?” asked Josh. “You didn’t have anything on you when I picked you up.”

Harry tensed. The man had asked the only question he couldn’t find a way around. He frowned, trying to imagine a quick lie. “Well... I got an uncle not that far from here.”

“Let us drive you there, then.” said Josh.

“No!” said Harry, his eyes wide, before he closed them and huffed in frustration. Opening his eyes again, he saw that they were looking at him.

“You lied.” said Alison.

He blushed, and wondered what to tell them. "Well... okay. I lied. The big bad guys kidnapped me from Switzerland because I got sloppy and used magic publicly."

He thought that, with them being wizard and witch, they would understand. However, they looked at him with eyes even wider than before, if that was possible.

"You... used magic... publicly?" asked Josh.

"What did you do?" inquired Alison.

"I don't remember exactly when. I think it was in that ski station and I was on a slight slope. I just pushed myself to go faster, but felt several people observing me and I stopped immediately." he stood up, and started pacing, not looking at them. "Some time afterwards, a commando barged in my home. I turned some of them away, but the others shot me with syringes nonetheless. I retreated to my mind, and awoke two weeks afterwards. After going to the 'gaseous reality,' I wiped their mind of my presence and escaped." He stopped for a second. "And you found me."

They looked completely gobsmacked. After a minute, Harry waved his hand in front of them. "Hello?"

Alison started, and looked up at him, frowning. "Harry... where is your wand?"

"My what?"

"Your wand. Every wizard needs one to do magic."

Josh nodded, producing one from his shirt sleeve. "And... how old are you?" he asked, pointing his wand at Harry, his move mirrored by Alison. They looked damn more serious than usual.

'Uh oh...' Harry thought. 'I sure opened my mouth there. Note to self: no talking about my abilities to wizards anymore.'

“I’m...” Harry stopped, seeming to count in his head, while actually concentrating on something else. A half-second afterwards, he disappeared, leaving two surprised wizards.

“Where is he?” asked Alison, casting several detection spells.

Josh looked at her in wonder. “Where is who?” he asked.

She looked at him in surprise, but understanding dawned quickly, despite a sudden pounding headache. “Damn, he wiped your mind already! Help me, Josh. He must be ar-” she stopped suddenly.

Josh looked at her. “He must be what? And who must be what, in fact?”

She looked back at him, trying to speak. After a moment, she shrugged. “I don’t remember.”

“That was unimportant, then.” He smiled. “Since you’re here, come here, sweetheart.”

“Oh! You!” she purred. “My place or your place?”

“If you ask, I’d say your place. You have more toys.”

They Apparated to her flat, and spent the next hour in a happiness-refilling activity, all thoughts of Harry gone from their mind. After having made them forget about him – it took a longer time for the girl due to her defences –, Harry stayed in the gaseous dimension and reflected, ignoring the hushed words coming from the shapes in front of him.

He knew he was able to move quite fast in the reality he was in. As fast as he could think. Perhaps he could go directly home?

He stopped thinking about that, when he heard two pops, one after the other. In front of his eyes, the two magic users had transferred into the gaseous dimension as well, only to quickly travel in the same

direction. Harry was fearful that they had overcome his memory change and were chasing him, but a detail made him think about something else. When they had appeared in the gaseous dimension, they were completely unmoving and had their eyes closed in concentration. He needed to know more about it, and started to move in the same direction. Luckily, they had moved in a straight line, and the smoke they had disturbed when moving that fast between the houses hadn't settled yet. Harry quickly found them engaged in an activity he knew he shouldn't witness, but he had an important goal in mind. He went to the man's mind and explored his recent memories, forcefully disregarding everything concerning Alison.

There! Josh had moved from his place to hers, using a special mean of transportation which wizards called Apparation. And they thought it was only a teleportation system, which moved them instantaneously. They also believed that it was restricted to the inside of a country.

Harry smiled as he extracted himself from the man's mind. And he blushed before leaving the room quickly. Shaking the suggestive images from his mind – even if they were smoky, he understood quite easily the global action which was taking place – he decided to put that long-distance Apparation theory to test.

Remembering the map of the world which hanged on the wall of his Geography class, and the county's local map from Josh's mind, he turned to the east, and pushed hard.

He stopped a few seconds later, just as he was on the verge of escaping the stratosphere and, after a moment of panic, remembered about the earth's shape. Whichever cardinal point you target, heading in a straight direction would inevitably send you in the air after a few miles – he was following a tangent, literally. He needed to go down, now, and aimed at the land mass further to the east.

After a few hops in the high layers of the atmosphere, he recognized the shape of Lake Geneva and rushed downwards. However, the fatigue of the numerous jumps was wearing him down, and he missed his target by a few miles, also going several dozens of yards too far. A hundred yards too far, exactly.

And, as he came from the air, he found himself underground. No light, no smell, no sound.

Wait... no sound? What was that humming?

No light? Why was he seeing two lines of sparks going right and left? Why was their light intensifying? And why were they getting closer to each other?

Sensing that something was amiss, he prepared himself for another jump, when everything went suddenly blindingly white.

And then black.

CERN, Large Electron-Positron Collider results building...

The two young scientists looked at the chart that had appeared on their computer screen.

“It’s not possible.” said the first, typing a sequence of keys which would refresh the data displayed. It didn’t change. “Genevieve, are you sure your program works?”

“It should!” huffed the young woman. “I spent enough time on it.”

“I know, I know... “it’s your thesis project” and so on. But come here and have a look.”

She looked at the screen, and repeated the man’s words. “It’s not possible.”

“What do you think it is?”

She frowned. “I don’t know, Jorg. It’s the first time an experience yields so many particles. And yet...” she began typing on the keyboard frantically, manipulating the 3D-model in front of her.

“What do you think we should do? Call Ossman?” asked the man.

“Wait a second... it looks vaguely familiar.” she said, continuing to type, rotating the displayed cloud of particles and zooming away, until she finally recognized its shape. She stopped typing and they both gasped in shock.

In front of them, vaguely distorted because the L3 particle detector wasn't made to catch that kind of picture, was a face, mouth wide open in a silent scream of pain.

“It's a joke.” breathed the man. “It must be. I never saw such an experiment yield so many neutrinos before, and they... they can't assume a shape, can they?” He paused for a second, before asking “Do you think Tim has done something with your computer?”

“I don't know. His new tool has been sent to every NeXT workstation, so he might have had access to it.”

“His 'web' thing will drive us all crazy. I think it's a joke. No collision can do that.”

The woman nodded, before slowly pressing the sequence of keys which would destroy the data.
Somewhere else...

A rush of consciousness, like an ocean wave... Water... Pain... The wave withdraws.

Darkness again.

Dreams... Life... Stars... Death... Explosion... The birth of a universe...
I saw it all.

Unconsciousness, again.

Memories... Flying... Missing... Tearing... Pain again.

Oblivion.

Blue light... Group... Friends... Swimming... Together... Caught...
Floating... Air.

Peace.

Man.

Hey.

“...peace, man! Hey!” the burly man said to his colleague.

What. In. The. Hell.

“What in the hell?” his colleague answered.

The two fishermen emptied their nets and the bloodied... thing... which came out in the middle of the fishes made them pause, before looking at each other and running toward the radio. None of them had the least knowledge in anatomy, but the thing had very definite and very human features. The problem was they weren't in place you normally found them in humans. And the most frightening was that it moved. It was alive, although barely, in obvious need for medical attention.

Stop.

The boat stopped. The men on it stopped running. The birds around them stopped in mid-flight and the waves around them stopped rolling.

Pain. I hurt. I need to. Heal.

In the middle of the fishes, the bloodied thing started to move. It was a sight to behold, but no one was looking at that particular moment. Bones which were sticking from strange places cracked and reformed themselves in other places. Flesh disappeared from areas to grow on others.

The body finally looked human again. A young man.

What happened to me? A memory... Witnessing a little Big Bang... Pushed... Travelling across the world... Through it, in fact... Across magnetic fields... Lack of concentration... Limbs catching matter on the way... Another memory... Not my own... Apparation... Splinching... Was that it?

The healing process continued, and nerve endings connected to various body parts, making the limbs twitch. Matter which generally doesn't belong to the inside of a human body got expelled, and wounds closed. Burnt skin and torn hair grew back.

But eyes didn't.

It doesn't matter. I do see.

The young man didn't even find it strange that he was able to perfectly see around him despite his lack of visual organs. He was even able to feel the structure of things around him, such as the two men immobilized in their rush for the radio, and the fishes below the hull, stopped in their swimming.

He slowly pushed on his arms, and tentatively stood up. Balancing himself, he went to the boat's prow, and looked at the waves.

The flow of time around him slowly returned to normalcy, and his vision stretched at the same moment. Although he wasn't surprised – strangely, he felt that he wouldn't be surprised anymore – the young man was curious. His eyes were seeing the scene around him multiple times. It was as though he was looking through a kaleidoscope, but each of the scene copy was different. In one of them, the fishermen were plunging knives through him and throwing him overboard. In another, they were on their knees in front of him, worshipping him like a god. In another, they simply didn't find him again and returned to work. And he was seeing thousands of these, some clearer than others. And, as he was watching them, several of them disappeared while others were created. Continually.

What is the meaning of this?

He had the faint inkling that he was going to find out. And soon.

Hey. Chris. What. Do. You. Think. We. Should. Do.

“Hey, Chris! What do you think we should do?” said the first fisherman, returning from the radio.

I. Don't. Know. Tucker.

Stop invading my thoughts with your banter!

“I don't know, Tucker.” answered Chris.

The. Hospital. Isn't. Crash.

Crash?

“The hospital isn't-”

Why are my kaleidoscopic visions all disappearing except one? One where...

CRASH!

...the ship wrecks?

The boat had brusquely stopped, and the two fishermen, after recovering their balance, looked around in fear.

“The reef!” said the fisherman named Tucker. “We didn't change our course!”

Alright. My kaleidoscopic visions return. In one, they both live, in another, they both die. Or I could repair the boat, but they would kill me because they fear me. I should let them die. Although...

The boat was slowly going down and the two men were running everywhere, trying to fetch the appropriate material for this kind of emergency. The problem was that their boss, who the boat belonged

to, was kind of sloppy and hadn't provided a life-saving self-inflatable skiff.

Okay. I know. Letting people die is bad for my karma. They haven't killed me yet, so they are innocent in the present.

Err...

Since when did I talk like that?

The water was reaching the boat's edge and the men were still in its cabin, trying to dislodge the life-saving jackets from behind the propane bottle. To their dismay, they weren't self-inflatable, and one of the two was completely torn.

I need to think. Stop.

Once again, the time stopped.

These two shall live. Their boat... well, let's say that the owner was sloppy and the boat shall plunge. However, those two shan't have memories of me. Except as an already dead body. After all, they radioed the coastguards already, and it's not as if I can modify the mind of an unknown person hundreds of miles away, is it?

The young man levitated, and two immobilized men flew out of the almost submerged cabin and followed him into the air. After flying at high speed for a minute, the two men were deposited on the nearest shore. Thankfully for them, a road near the beach indicated that the island was inhabited. After changing their memory a bit, the young man left, walking southward on the beach. The fine and warm white sand under his feet was creating a world of sensations and he wanted to experience it.

And the time flew again.

To be continued in next chapter: Leaving for Parts Unknown...

As sand in clockwork, he has
Messed up with an experience.

The result's unknown but has
A familiar taste, I sense.

Chapter 8 – Leaving for Parts Unknown

posted July 31st, 2005

After a few weeks of non-stop walking, he had to lie on the sand, allowing his aching joints and cramping muscles a bit of rest, and he revelled in the feeling of the sand under him. As he wasn't intending to move soon, he noticed that his many visions reduced to only a few, and that he could actually enjoy a bit of stargazing, looking at the numerous stars that had appeared with the night. That was when he noticed several things.

Firstly, he noticed that Mars wasn't appearing in the sky tonight, although his visions told him it would be bright soon.

He also remarked that his visions had narrowed sufficiently for him to discern two scenes. In one, the place where he was now lying was empty and the sky was like it was now. It was the clearer of the two. In the second, he wasn't there either, but the stars had disappeared. He focussed on that vision, and noticed that ominous clouds hid the stars, the sea water had disappeared, the surrounding trees were reduced to smouldering remains, and the sand, the precious sand of which he had taken the care to count the grains...

The sand wasn't sand anymore. It was glass, melted by the high temperature generated by an unknown source. In his disturbed mind, whatever had happened, or more clearly, whatever would happen, would destruct his little haven and it had to be stopped. Several other visions involving death and destruction were also bothersome, but, as they didn't concern him, they were too blurry to identify properly, and he didn't know how he could help the people involved.

In his detached state, he also didn't really care.

He tried, though, to will his visions to change, but, apparently, it wasn't by will alone that events happened or stopped happening. Powerless, he saw the bomb exploding in Madras, and the plane crashing in Thailand. He saw them repeatedly, until it actually happened. He knew he could have done something, but his mind didn't provide him the needed information.

After a long time focussing on his visions, he fell into a sleep-like trance.

The sun was shining on a desolated countryside. Well... it wasn't exactly the sun, nor was it a countryside. He was in front of the ruins of what seemed to have been a beautiful castle. Behind the castle's fallen walls, several buildings were in disarray, some of them visible only by their traces on the ground. A black mist was enshrouding the back of the ruins. There was also a white central building with an adjoining silo, both damaged. The silo had a deep gash on its side, and a strange luminous liquid was leaking out of it. He didn't know where he was, nor if this was another vision, but he knew the leak had to be stopped quickly. And, on top of everything, floating above the ruins, was a twin spiral of light, rotating slowly.

He ignored the dead creatures in front of him and instinctively levitated, like last time. When and where it was? He had no clues. He was sure he had already levitated before, but his memory was having troubles recently. He wasn't capable of remembering anything after a couple of minutes. There were things he knew instinctively and others he did in the same way, but he couldn't find any precise memory of his past. He didn't even know his name.

How peculiar.

However, the liquid was still pouring from the damaged silo in front of him and that was more urgent than philosophical debates. The building beneath it had already been coated in a sheen of luminous white, and the leak had to be stopped. He reached out with his hand and several builder tools appeared. He selected a few and covered the gash with a generous helping of quick-drying cement. It wasn't pretty, and it would have to be completely repaired in the future, but it was working nonetheless.

After making the construction tools disappear, once again without knowing how he did it, he washed his hands and looked at the handiwork. Raising an eyebrow, he remarked that the person who did that was sloppy not to have built a larger and more solid silo instead. He had completely forgotten he had done it.

Exploring around, he noticed that the things he thought were buildings were in fact windowless slabs, as if made completely of concrete, and saw that there were connections between several of them. Most of these connections, though, were dangling aimlessly in the air as if a thoughtless butcher had sliced them off. It gave a sad appearance to the whole setting. He did remark, though, that a few of the fallen 'concrete' blocks had mingled in an unrecognisable tangle right next to the central building, and random connections had been made between them. He could say that these were very active connections, because of the sparks of lightning which erupted around them.

He tentatively approached his hand...

...and a bolt hit him.

He woke up suddenly.

Salty waves were washing his body. He didn't remember what he was doing there, nor how he had arrived there either. He remembered was that he had travelled very quickly at one point, and that he had arrived in the middle of a bank of fishes. He remembered leaving two fishermen in the nearest island and then walking on a small beach. He remembered that he had wanted to feel every grain of sand under his feet, wanting to feel the minuteness of things in this universe. He had walked on the beaches of several islands, using his instinctive levitation to jump from one to the other. Led by his visions, he had headed north each time. He barely knew that several weeks passed by without him meeting anyone, and that his body wasn't coping well with the lack of nourishment.

He didn't care.

Nearby, a clearly irritated female voice interrupted his reverie. "...riously! How can you be so partial?"

A male voice answered. "I like surfin' in the mornin', what can I say? Besides, I'm not the only one!"

“Yeah, I know. I was there yesterday, you know? I counted the bottles you drank, and when I reached 15, I knew you’d push yourself in a sticky situation – again.”

“I wouldn’t call...”

“You did bet with your infamous friends that you’d surf that spot. And we’re Sunday. The locals don’t take it well for us to surf today. That why you wanted to be that early? And on our last day of vacation? And... Oh my god!”

The two voices stopped not far from him. From what the sand told him, the dozen others must have stopped too.

He sat up, and glanced around.

He wasn’t surprised.

He wouldn’t be surprised by anything anymore. He knew that. How? That he didn’t know.

There were people. Fifteen of them. Half of them holding a surf board. Surfers.

He glanced at the sun. July 10th, 1991, 8:43am GMT-12. How did he know? Apart the fact that he had now an intimate knowledge of how Time worked, he didn’t know. And he also didn’t know what it meant. And he didn’t care. But it seemed that the aforementioned knowledge had replaced some other important part of his memories. Like: how to sustain oneself.

How peculiar.

He slowly stood. Even if he had felt it was two weeks because of his control over Time, two months had passed since his awakening in the boat, and one since he lied on that shore. However, the lack of food meant that his muscles had melted like snow in the sun. Upon seeing him, some of the surfers recoiled, a couple of girls blushed, and three young men guffawed. But most of them paled under their tanned skin.

He was naked, something which caused most of the laugh. However, even the few merry ones paled like the others when they noticed his eyes. Or lack thereof. His eyes were still missing, displaying blackened recesses in their place, as well as largely scarred tissue around them. He didn't understand their reactions, but he didn't care either.

He started to walk toward them, heading toward the place they had came from, intending to go somewhere where he could find help for his sustenance. The surfers slowly withdrew from his path, but he suddenly stopped, and turned around.

If he had eyes, one would say that he was staring intently at two of them. He knew they knew something about him. His multiple visions stopped, only to be replaced by others. That's when he discovered the coloured tinge about them. His previous visions had been a monochrome blue, some with a more intense tinge on them. The ones he was watching now had a red hue. He didn't know what it meant, though. Nor did he care. Typical.

He forgot about it, and looked at the visions, which were coming and going, faster and faster. Most of them contained himself as central character. And, in most of them, he had eyes.

He was looking at three human-shaped clouds in a smoky room.

He was brushing his teeth.

He was shot with syringes.

He was going to school with his siblings.

He was riding a camel in the desert.

He was...

He was witnessing the birth of a universe in Geneva.

Geneva. His school was there. His home was there. And he suspected that his mind was there, too. He had to go there. His blue-

tinged visions returned in force and he understood that he was going home soon.

Looking at the two, he spoke his first words since his awakening. He was sore, and it was more croaking than speaking, but they understood anyway.

“Bring me... Geneva.”

CERN, in the cafeteria, several weeks earlier...

“Ossman wants my hide!” the man whispered urgently.

The woman he was talking to raised an elegant eyebrow and sipped her coffee. “Of course.”

“Seriously, he said that he wanted last week’s experiment results, and I... I...”

“You told him we deleted them because what they showed could only be a joke.”

“But... yes! Of course I did. Weren’t you there when we witnessed them?”

“Yes.” the woman answered. Contrarily to her companion, she seemed to have recovered since the strange event. “I don’t think, however, that our hierarchy will see in a good light the erasing of data coming from an experiment whose worth is more than our salary. Do you?”

“Well...”

She took a thin black box from her handbag and negligently threw it to him. When he opened it, he found several mirror-like discs inside.

“What is it?” he asked, dumbfounded.

“ This, my esteemed colleague-who-is-going-to-work-hard-to-sustain-his-thesis, is the only copy of those results.”

“Where... where did you get them from? I saw you removing the files!”

She looked at him with exaggeratedly wide eyes, pulling the tip of her ears outwards in a poor imitation of a well-known movies character. “When like me long years you’ll have passed, the procedure know you will.”

“Huh?”

“The LEP detectors, and especially the L3, keep track of each experiment for some time. When you saw me deleting the data, I merely removed the files from my computer. When I left the building, I had a doubt and came back to the detector’s console to save the data. When I noticed its size, though, I had to make a dash to the warehouse because one CD wouldn’t have been enough.”

“Why? I mean... one CD should have been enough, shouldn’t it? The data produced by last week’s experiment should hold on a regular CD, one of those used for music, outside the CERN. And why did you say it was the only copy?”

“There have been other experiments in between and the console doesn’t have ours anymore. And, about the data size, you’re right, but it’s not the case here. On top of needing several discs, I had to use the double-sided multi-layered optical discs developed by our dear technicians so that everything could be stored in it.”

“But...” he counted the discs. “But that makes 200 gigabytes!”

“Precisely.” She smiled. “I don’t think Ossman will get your hide... immediately.”

“Thank you. Err... What do you mean, immediately?”

“The data is still showing a face and, despite the similarities, it’s not neutrinos. I checked the particles’ weight, energy, movement and

charge. I don't know what these are. I should concur on saying that it's a stupid joke. However..." she frowned.

"However?"

"It can't be a joke. I downloaded this data from the very detector's console."

"So what? Anyone could have put joke material there..." he trailed off, looking at her expressionless face.

She sighed and rose, her coffee forgotten. "I can't say it's impossible, because it's not. I thought about it for most of the week, you see, and I know it's practically impossible. The console gives data that is obtained through the L3. In other terms, it's read-only and can't be forged, except by opening the detector and tweaking its insides. Do you have any idea of the clearance needed to do that? And to do what, a mere joke? Besides, I checked with the other experiments and they yielded normal results."

"Can't it be a bug of some sorts?" he asked, grasping at straws to stay in a world he could understand.

She shot his hopes down, though. "No bug can yield that much results. Especially with such a precise image." She walked toward the door and, not turning back, waved her hand to him. "Say hi to Ossman for me, will you?"

Mexico City International Airport...

Josh and Alison exited the plane, looking like the tourists they were. Following them was the young boy they had met mere hours before, clad in one of Alison's smallest outfits. They barely had had the time to change clothes or pack properly, as the feeling of urgency coming from the boy's request had overwhelmed their schedule. Thankfully, their friends had assured them they would take care of their belongings.

They had tried to speak to the boy on the way from Samoa, but he had been mute and sat still on the plane, even when it went through turbulences. His only words had been to thank them after they bought him a meal in a restaurant before their departure. They had noticed his famished appearance before giving him clothes, and it had disturbed them greatly that he wasn't able to eat until they showed him. As soon as he got the concept, though, he had lunged on the food and they had had to ask for a few refillings until he could be satisfied. That's when he had thanked them. Later, after a hushed discussion with Alison in the cab, Josh had brought him in Samoa airport's toilets and cast a glamour charm on his face. His taciturn attitude and unnerving way of seeing despite not having eyes had already disturbed many people and the magic users hadn't wanted problems at immigration and customs.

In Mexico, their flight for Switzerland wasn't until the next day and they slept in the local Hilton, near the departure gates. Unbeknownst to them, he hadn't slept at all, merely resting his tired body. His mind was exploring his visions. He had already understood that the blue-tinged visions were of the future while the red ones were of the past. He couldn't read his own past very well, though, only having glimpses of information, and he felt that his answers were in Geneva. However, he could distinctly feel the past of his location.

The Nahuatl culture had bathed the city since its Aztec period, when it was called Tenochtitlan. It wasn't quite extinct and helped him to view the city's past to the days of its foundation, so many years before. Unexpectedly, he was particularly interested in two of the local legends: the Nahual and the Tzitzimime. The Nahuals were shape-shifting guardian angels which the population often called shaman or... wizard. The Tzitzimime, on the other hand, were quite evil. According to the myth he witnessed the retelling of, they were some of the numerous stars in the night sky, and were called "star demons of darkness" because they constantly attacked the sun when it rose or set. There was even an ancient prophecy involving an eclipse and the number 666, but it was the moment the sun rose and he rose from the bed.

The morning saw all three of them up before the phone rang for their wake-up call. The sound didn't disturb the boy, though, and Alison

had to enter his room to answer the phone. The next thing she did was something she had discussed with Josh on the previous evening. She had wanted to know why and how the seemingly blind boy was like that.

“Legilimens.”

She was knowledgeable in that art, and it surprised her to see the unnatural state of the boy's mind. She had rarely witnessed such desolation in a person's mind, and it had occurred in victims of repeated Obliviation or the Cruciatus curse. The dead creatures and the castle ruins indicated someone who had been a powerful Occlumens before, but it shouldn't be possible, as the boy wasn't looking older than twelve at the most. And the thing which surprised her to the point of kicking herself out, panting, was the twin spiral of light floating on top of everything. It looked like a galaxy.

Even if he had felt her intrusion, the boy hadn't moved, still staring through the window absently. That also unnerved her. How could he see? She knew that the eyes in his face were the result of a charm, a concealment of empty orbits and largely scarred skin.

After breakfast, they went to the departure panel, only to find that many flights have been delayed, including their own, initially scheduled at 8:30am. Apparently, it seemed that numerous "foreign object debris" had littered the tarmac overnight. During the wait, Alison related her findings concerning the boy to Josh, and they discussed about it, without reaching a conclusion.

It was only 3 hours afterwards that they could enter their plane. At that time, several persons were speaking in hushed tones, throwing nervous glances to their watches and toward the northwest. Half a dozen passengers, who looked like local Indians, even left the passenger queue. Unable to read their mind because of the crowd, Alison couldn't understand their anxiety, and when Josh grabbed one of them to ask for an explanation, they spoke a rapid succession of incomprehensible words before fleeing.

Neither Josh nor Alison knew why these were frightened, but they embarked with the boy nonetheless, missing his frown. They also

didn't notice the knowing look exchanged between several other passengers in the queue.

It took 20 minutes to board everyone – except the passengers who had fled – and once everyone was properly settled, the plane began its takeoff route. Josh, being slightly claustrophobic, had required a window seat and got 34A, and the boy was beside him, in front of Alison. Because he was looking outside, Josh missed the boy's darkening expression, but didn't miss the darkening in the sky, near the north-western mountains. He wasn't the only one, and excited and anxious whispers alike erupted in the plane. Even the flight assistants were looking through the windows. The plane turned on the runaway track, however, and nobody could see the darkness anymore. The attendants absently repeated the required moves concerning the flight's security, and the plane soon accelerated and took off, rising toward the sky.

A moth began to fly wildly in the cabin.

The boy, beside Josh, began to flail his arms equally madly to prevent the insect to approach him.

And all lights went out.

It was a daytime flight, and its wired logic hadn't been programmed the inside lights to be lit until much later. On top of that, the plane had been delayed, and nobody had taken the necessary measures against what was happening.

A full solar eclipse.

In the cabin, as the plane was gaining altitude, the passengers were witnessing the landscape around them, having the chance of being in a plane flying through such a literally astronomical event.

However, Josh wasn't looking outside anymore, as he was trying to calm the boy, still sending his arms left and right to push the moth away. It was a particularly large one, and beautiful, in its own way. Its 15-inch wingspan was decorated in orange with black highlights, and with four white shapes symmetrically positioned. The insect was

flying frantically, until a well-aimed hit threw it on the floor. Josh was smiling proudly, a rolled newspaper in his hand. However, when he looked at the insect, his smile faltered. People started to inch away from it, too.

The four white shapes, now identifiable because of the animal's relative stillness, were human skulls.

The plane began to rock, and the passengers who had stood to get a better look, whether it was on the sky or on the insect, were slammed back in their seats. It was like a turbulence, only stronger than usual. And it seldom happened at that low altitude.

The boy raised his head from the prone moth on the floor, and his fake eyes looked right at the middle of the plane, where several high-pitched shrieks tore the air. An overly large spider was there, moving its hairy body because of the plane's rocking movements.

It moved at the same time, in fact.

Or was the plane's current hazardous state... because of it?

The idea felt weird, but the boy had a sinking feeling that the moth and spider were linked to the plane and to what was happening outside. If the plane continued, it would crash. It was already losing altitude, everyone could tell. This hadn't happened in any of his visions, however, which meant...

...that the crisis must be resolved outside of the normal time flow.

He felt his inside grow cold as his resolve hardened. At the same time, he felt a prickling sensation on his whole body, and he stood suddenly.

"Stop."

It was as if the universe braked suddenly. Everything around him slowed down quickly, to the point of immobility.

The boy felt unbalanced for a short while. He had been short, and his head was now touching the plane alley's roof. He looked at himself and did a double take.

"That's not normal." he said, and jumped at the sound of his own voice. Not only it wasn't his own – older, sounding mature – but it also wasn't English. It was a language he had heard recently, but he failed to pinpoint where.

Unaware of his surroundings, especially the still moving insects despite him stopping time around, he inspected his body. Contrarily to his previous way of seeing, it wasn't in a monochrome vision. In fact, he wasn't having visions. He knew, from past experience, that he didn't have visions when the time was stopped. However, he had never transformed in an 8-feet tall feathered half-human before. He raised his arm, wondering at the colourful feathers, and noticed that his skin, under said feathers, was scaly.

"Ah. So nice to be oneself, don't you think?" asked a raspy although definitely feminine voice nearby.

"You're right, as always, Itzpapalotl." answered another voice, also feminine but muffled under a constant clicking as she spoke.

He jerked around, and found a woman standing where the fallen moth had been. She had a dress which displayed the orange and black designs of the moth's wings, but missed the skull-like white spots. He frowned, before looking at her face and gasping. No need to draw a skull, as one was looking straight at him.

"And it's so nice to join us, Quetzalcoatl. It has been such a long time." Itzpapalotl continued, looking into his eyes.

"The prophecy, you know..." clicked the other woman, approaching them. "Nothing ever happens by chance."

He looked at her and gasped again, as her mouth was missing, replaced by a wooden rectangle on which three spider-like fangs moved, giving the yellow-skinned woman a spider-like appearance.

“You have an appointment in Mictlan tonight.” she continued. “I doubt that the underworld gods of death will give you a warm welcome, especially Mictlantecuhtli.”

That’s when he remembered. Well, not him exactly. The feathered man who had taken the place of the boy remembered his life. His parents, Mixcoatl and Xochiquetzal. His exile because of his twin brother Tezcatlipoca. Mayahuel’s death at the hands of the Tzitzimime. Speaking of which...

Five passengers of the still immobile plane started to move despite his previous order, transforming into something different in the way, and gathering behind Itzpapalotl. “Monsters from above.” he thought. Demon stars. Tzitzimime. But his new memories allowed him to understand that it was normal. It had been written for the mortals to remember and prepare, even if the myth had been distorted. His return had been scheduled for 666 years after he helped the stray tribe to found their capital city, and he had to defend...

“Thank you for being there, my friend.” said a deep voice behind him, and he felt a strong and warm hand on his equally strong shoulder. “It has been a while, but I knew you could make it.”

...Tonatiuh, the sun god, in his perpetual fight against the demon stars. Not removing his eyes from the monsters in front of him, he turned his head slightly and nodded. The two of them against the seven demons. Winners take the world.

A few seconds of standby ensued, each god and demon thinking about the incoming fight.

Quetzalcoatl knew, because he had possessed a boy who had accompanied them, that Josh and Alison had channelling sticks on them, which they called wands. They wouldn’t be as efficient as the shaman staves of old, but it would be better than nothing. As soon as the thought reached his mind, the feathered serpent which was his body uncoiled his tail and jumped, evading the moth goddess and

snatching Josh's wand from its floppy holster. Throwing it to his friend, he said "channelling staff", before jumping to fetch Alison's.

The sun god had a moment of confusion, but quickly understood his feathered friend's actions, and started to use the stick to aim at the monsters. They had recognized the threat, though, and fled quickly behind the separating walls. Alison's wand had been stashed more securely than Josh's, and Quetzalcoatl didn't join the fray until they had all fled. In their run, though, Tonatiuh succeeded in touching two of them with scalding rays of fire, transforming them in a pile of ash. However, the god wasn't used to the frailty of a wizard wand, and it melted in his hands just as Quetzalcoatl extracted Alison's.

The look on both of their faces could have been comical, if they didn't have a danger looming ahead. As the sun god had a more efficient way to kill the monsters, Quetzalcoatl gave him the wand, whispering him to restrain himself. They then advanced toward the Business class. The sloped walkway was narrow, and Quetzalcoatl, being Tonatiuh's protector, was walking first, flexing his muscles in preparation of the incoming brawl.

"Argh!"

The danger, however, came from behind this time. Visibly, Itzpapalotl had used her alternative form to fly in the other alley, and attacked the sun god from behind. She tried to strangle the man with her skeletal hand, while grasping the wand with the other. The other monsters made a good use of the distraction to try to grab the feathered snake, but it reached out and strangled two of them in his powerful coils, while pushing the others with his arms at the same time. Just as he released the bodies of the two fallen demons, he felt a bite at the end of his tail, and noticed the smug look on the spider woman's face. His tail instinctively lashed out, and flung her against the outside door.

The force of the impact made a sickening crunching sound, and she didn't move, the door handle protruding from her distorted mouth. Gasping under the poison, Quetzalcoatl grasped a sabre fallen from the two strangled monsters and cut the end of his tail. He then fell on

the floor, feeling most of the poison leaving his body with his blood. He was slowly recovering.

At the same moment, Tonatiuh and Itzpapalotl fought for their life and the possession of the wand. As they both had their hands on it, each of them tried to use it against the other, but failed, and rays of fire and swarms of moths were erupting from the wand tip at regular intervals. Thankfully, one of the moth swarms took hold of the last demon, which was standing behind the recovering form of Quetzalcoatl. The unnatural moths encircled it, prodding at it, stinging it, and blocking his vision, hearing, and respiration. Despite the monster's efforts to push them away, they continued until he fell on the floor, on all fours first, and then lying. After a last struggle, it didn't move anymore and the moths disappeared. It wasn't as fast as a ray of fire from the sun god, but it was Itzpapalotl's way of killing.

Alison's wand, being held by two deities fighting for its possession, was becoming very hot. Recognizing the signs because he had had the same happening with the other wand, Tonatiuh stopped pulling on it, and when Itzpapalotl, surprised, began to smile at her apparent victory, he shoved the wand forward, into her mouth. A millisecond of pause occurred, in which the withered eyes looked at him imploringly, but the issue was inevitable. Tonatiuh pushed his power a last time, and the wand exploded, killing the moth goddess at the same time.

His own fight finished, the sun god turned around, and witnessed something which hadn't been foreseen. Even if Quetzalcoatl's fate hadn't been written in the prophecy, the fight should have been between them and the demons. The dark cloud swirling toward his panting friend meant only one thing.

"Tezcatlipoca!"

Behind the smoke, a mocking voice answered.

"Yes, Tonatiuh? I'd rather you don't interfere. You know, once you ended the fight, the prophecy was ended, and I could take care of my goody-two shoes of a brother."

“Noooooooooooooooo!” yelled the sun god, and he threw himself forward, in an effort to grasp his friend before the killing cloud reached him. It was too late already, though, and he couldn’t proceed forward or he would be killed also. Looking around for anything to help him, he found the sabre that Quetzalcoatl had used to “heal” himself from the poison, still bloody. He grasped it, and threw it towards the cloud and whatever was behind.

He distinctly heard a noise like a broken glass, indicating his success, as well as a gurgling sound afterwards. The cloud dissipated immediately, and Tonatiuh stared as Tezcatlipoca, who was holding the frame of his broken mirror, looked down to the sabre handle protruding from his chest. The dark god had barely the time to raise his head again, before falling through the frame, cutting himself even more in the process.

Tonatiuh lunged at his friend’s lying form. Quetzalcoatl wasn’t moving, his head in his arms, facing down, in the stillness of death. The sun god knelt beside him, closed his eyes, and something unexpected happened: the sun god, whose eyes were of fire, was crying for the first time.

At the same time, the prone body of his friend moved, turning around, and the first two tears of Tonatiuh landed in the very eyes of his friend.

The serpent god coughed, and his friend jumped in surprise.

“You... you’re not dead?”

Quetzalcoatl looked around and, noticing the dead body of his malevolent brother, thanked Tonatiuh before telling him that he had studied the Smoking Mirror for a very long time, and he knew that, by staying on the floor, and blocking his ears, eyes, and respiration, he could hope to escape it. The two of them hugged for several seconds, until Quetzalcoatl separated.

“You cried?” he asked his fiery friend, who blushed.

“No!” was the indignant answer.

“Yes, you did. I feel... strange.”

“We should perhaps end our mission here. Now that the Tzitzimime have been banned to the world of Tomoanchan, they won’t harass us anymore.”

“You’re right, you know. Let’s give these two their bodies and memories back.”

Tonatiuh returned to the empty seat he had come from, concentrated, and his translucent form lifted from the seat, leaving a fiery-headed man in his stead.

“Your turn.”

Quetzalcoatl sat and concentrated also, rising from the seat afterwards as well, leaving a boy sleeping on the seat. Once done, he looked at the boy thoughtfully.

“Shall we?” asked his friend.

“Wait.”

“What?”

“Look at him.”

“Oh my!”

“So, you see it, too?”

“Yes. Seems that our predicament isn’t the only task on his plate.”

A pause.

“Do you think that...?” asked Quetzalcoatl.

“Of course, my friend.” answered Tonatiuh, smiling. “You have fusioned with him once already, go ahead. On top of that, he was predestined to be yours.”

The feathered snake slowly nodded, and placed his hands on the boy’s head. After concentrating for a second, making the boy squirm, he removed his hand, and spoke.

“We have been linked since your birth, young Harry: you have always been able to talk with snakes, and birds have always liked you. Your destiny is tortuous, and you will need help to accomplish it. As you offered your help for me, albeit involuntarily, I hereby offer mine to you, as your Nahual. Rest well, now, as I borrowed a large part of your energy.”

The two gods started to disappear, traces of the fight disappearing as well, and Time flew forward again.
Geneva International Airport...

The first problem of Josh and Alison was that they didn’t have their wands anymore. The second problem was that they couldn’t disembark from the plane yet. And the third was that their young charge was sleeping soundly. They had spent most of the flight in conversation about their wand and the boy, without reaching any conclusion. Between them, they had also started to call him Nalu Keiki, meaning “lost child”. And said child he had slept soundly all along, not moving a muscle during the whole trip.

After two hours and a half of waiting, the passengers were finally released, and some of the most observant remarked that there were less passengers descending from the plane than there had been embarking it, and that the crew was being questioned about it. The boy awoke at that moment, and they headed outside.

Even if they didn’t have their wands, the two magic users owned charmed items like identification papers, and they waltzed through the customs, something which helped since the young teenager didn’t have any identification. They left the airport as Mr and Mrs. Stuart

and their son Karl. Once they found themselves in a cab entering the town of Geneva itself, the boy turned toward them.

“Thank you.” he simply said, and the two wizards felt as if a burden had been removed from their back, as they had fulfilled the quest they had been given.

If they had had their wands, they could have Apparated out at that moment, returning to their flat and their friends, but the gaze they threw at each other had the same meaning. On top of their missing wands, the boy was a living question mark, and they wanted to know more about him, to help him. Besides, since the beginning of the trip, they had felt as if they had already met him. They had tried to put the feeling aside, but it stayed, even if they now were in Geneva proper.

Once there, the “lost child” seemed exactly that: lost. They convinced the cab driver to drive around the town, telling everything about the town on the way. A “tourist tour”, in fact. However, nothing they saw raised a sign of recognition from the boy...

...until they crossed a large sign indicating that the CERN was 10km ahead. As it was larger than regular road signs, while being smaller than advertisements, Josh asked about what the acronym and logo meant. The cab driver wasn’t a physics specialist, but he knew his town and its attractions. When he told them that the twin rings were particle accelerators where scientists tried to reproduce the Big Bang, the boy’s ears perked, and they drove to the science campus, incidentally passing near the airport again.

Once there, the two wizards feared a difficult time convincing people to help them. However, the people working there were very helpful, and they quickly succeeded in getting a list of people working with the accelerators two months ago. They went to find them, one after the other, but many scientists weren’t there because of a conference occurring in Milwaukee at the same time. However, Fate was with them, unless it was sheer luck, because their seventh target reacted differently than the others.

“Yes?” asked the woman, turning around from her workstation.

Alison answered “Are you Genev-”

“Oh mon dieu!” she interrupted in French.

The woman, who had just caught sight of the boy’s face, had instantly recognized him. Her hands went to her mouth but didn’t reach their destination. She had fainted.

A short time later, and with the help of a glass of water, she woke up. After blinking a few times, she sat up, pushed Alison aside, and kneeled in front of the boy whose face had been her nightmare for two months.

“So, it’s true...” she muttered, touching his face delicately.

“What is true, Miss?” asked Josh.

She didn’t answer for a while, seeming lost in thoughts as she was still looking and touching the boy’s face. After they asked the question a second then a third time, she started, as if surprised by their presence. She then began to explain who she was, what she was doing, and how she had come to obtain a picture of the boy – even if she didn’t know how that was possible.

“...and I don’t know what we can do about it.” she concluded.

Hearing these words, Josh looked at Alison, then stared at the boy thoughtfully, a reaction his girlfriend noticed at once.

“What’s on your mind, Josh?” she asked.

He took a moment to answer. “Do you remember Magdalena Pietrzak? Professor Pietrzak?”

The non sequitur confused Alison, and he continued.

“She had been our Technomancy teacher, at both our schools.”

“...and?” she asked, looking at the Muggle woman anxiously, but Genevieve had returned to the boy and was asking him questions softly.

“Well...” Josh answered, “I happen to have read an article about her in the Magic Herald.”

“You read newspapers?” she asked mockingly. “I’m so proud of you. I still don’t see the link.”

“Shush, you. If you want to know, you’d better listen.”

“Sorry, macho man.” she smirked. “I’m all ears.”

“Humph!” he sighed. “It was about her new appointment. Apparently, Muggle technology and science had improved so much that they needed a whole new Department in our Magical Government instead of a small bureau in the Education Department. She had been appointed Head of the newly-created Department of Technomancy.”

“What does it have to do with this?”

“The boy, Alison! The boy! Did you listen to her explanation?” he asked, pointing to the still oblivious women nearby. “She told us that he had been stuck in the middle of an experiment. A Muggle technology experiment. I don’t know what to do about it, nor do you, but I think that a Technomancy expert can help us. Don’t you think?”

They were interrupted by a third voice. “What’s a muggle?”

Their head swivelling, the two magic-users noticed that the young woman wasn’t holding the boy’s face anymore, but was looking at them, a confused expression on her face.

“Oh no.” Josh said, shaking his head.

Alison nodded thoughtfully. “I can’t even Oblivate her. We definitely need help.”

“Right.” he answered.

“What are you talking about?” Genevieve asked.

Alison sighed, and nudged Josh forward. Reluctantly, he repeated a set of sentences he had learnt at school, in the course labelled Muggle discussion and escape tactics.

“We are from the Government, Miss, and we have come across your case recently. We-”

“You aren’t from the Government.” Genevieve answered tartly. “Government agents don’t cloth themselves like Hawaiian surfers. On top of that, we are in Switzerland, here, and your American accent fails you.”

“Damn, she’s smart.” mumbled Alison.

Josh looked at her, and shrugged in defeat.

“Okay. We’re not. But you’ll have difficulties understanding and accepting.” said Alison.

Genevieve stared at her defiantly. “A challenge. I like challenges. On top of that, I witnessed... him...” she said, patting the boy’s shoulder almost tenderly, before continuing “And I don’t think anything could shock me more. Judging from your earlier discussion, you don’t even know what happened to him. Correct?”

The two wizards looked at her with round eyes, before Josh muttered “And witty.”

Alison threw his boyfriend a dark look, before pushing him toward the telephone. While he tried to reach his friends and then the old Professor, she tried to answer to Genevieve’s question.

“You are correct. Now...” she drew a large intake of air. “What do you know about magic?”

After phoning their friends and getting directions to the local magical mall, Josh spent almost two hours in long-distance calls, finally succeeding in reaching Professor Pietrzak. After another lengthy discussion, they agreed to meet two weeks later. Earlier wasn't possible, as the old woman had a lot on her schedule already.

Genevieve proposed to lodge them, as she definitely wanted to know more about magic, and to understand the mystery behind the boy. They settled in her small apartment for the week-end, and decided to visit the local magical shops on the following Monday.

Josh and Alison brought Genevieve and the boy to the magical place, in a secluded alleyway of Geneva called Another Road. After discussing about it, they agreed to withdraw a hundred gold Galleons each from the local Gringotts branch. It would be sufficient for their needs here. However, the remoteness of their real account added a hefty 25 percent fee and they left the bank a bit miffed. They then went to buy replacement wands at the local wandmaker. Genevieve was opening round eyes upon discovering the reality of Alison's explanations as they crossed shops selling flying brooms and the like.

The wand merchant was an easy-going witch in her early forties named Marig Klein. Despite her age, she was quite new to the job, having started five years before. However, she had invented a spell to discover a customer's most appropriate wand quite easily. It took only five minutes to get Alison and Josh two new wands which, even if not as comfortable as the old ones, were good enough for everything they could think of.

After witnessing the gold sparks erupting from the chosen wands, Genevieve asked tentatively "Ahem... you didn't tell me who was or wasn't a wizard. Could I be one?"

Josh and Alison looked at each other, not knowing what to answer, but Marig smiled. "Well... the spell I used can find which wand is most useable by a person. While my stocks aren't as large as other wandmakers', I'm sure to find a wand for every wizard or witch who wand to buy one. So, if you can use one, I'll see it immediately. And the contrary is true also. Step forward, if you wish, and we'll try."

Genevieve advanced tentatively toward the counter, and Magic cast the spell on her. Without result. "I'm sorry, dear, but you don't seem to be magical."

Genevieve retreated, a bit peeved. "Can I learn how to be one? Are there schools?"

"I'm sorry, Genevieve," said Alison. "My explanations about magic were less complete than I thought, and perhaps I didn't mention that it was genetic. Except some rare cases, you are born one or not."

"Which cases?"

"Ah... Err... It's more about cases where people lose the ability, really."

"True, true. However..." added Marig, smiling at Genevieve's sudden hopeful look. "You can learn about us. I mean... you won't be able to cast spells, but it's not always the only thing in magic. You can help in a magical shop. You can learn our traditions and folklore. You can have the knowledge, even if you can't practise on it. I always was against all that Secrecy things, which was why I moved out of England, where it's enforced."

She laughed at the stunned expressions of the three adults in front of her, and continued on her diatribe. "Come on! Nobody would want to burn us at the stake nowadays. Right? It's like the underage restriction. Here in Switzerland, children are allowed to use restrained wands to acquire a habit of basic spellcasting. I'm definitely better here than in Hogsmeade!"

She paused for a second, and seemed to notice the calm boy with them. "Speaking of which... do you want me to test him for a wand?"

Genevieve hadn't understood everything, and was still processing the many details of what she heard, and the other two were too stunned by the open-mindedness of the woman and the local laws.

“Come here, boy. Don’t be shy.” she said softly. “What’s your name?”

“Harry.” he answered, before looking at her for the first time.

Josh and Alison looked at the boy, gaping. They had tried to get the boy’s name in Samoa and in Mexico City, but the boy hadn’t answered, looking at them with his empty orbits. Josh was half tempted to remove the glamour charms around the boy to see if he was the same. Something had happened in the plane, he remembered.

Marig wasn’t disturbed, though. She smiled. “Well, Harry, would you want to be tested for a wand? How old are you, by the way?”

“Yes. 4000.”

“WHAT?” the four adults asked at the same time.

Harry closed his eyes, and spoke. “4000 days, 20 hours, 4 minutes, 10 seconds.”

Opening his eyes, he smiled. When they didn’t react for a long time, he looked at Marig.

“5 minutes, now.” he said.

That seemed to wake the lady, and she moved things around, a bit agitatedly, while muttering “Sure, sure. A bit unusual. Well... How old does that make him? Let’s see...”

Genevieve had already made the computation and answered the question. “He’s almost 11. His birthday is in two weeks.”

Marig looked at her, then at Harry, then at Alison, back at Harry, then at Josh, back at Harry again. She shook her head, seeming to wake up, and smiled.

“Good! Let’s proceed.”

Harry advanced to the counter, and the shopkeeper chanted the same incantation for the fourth time.

For Josh, the result had been several rays, differently coloured, going from his left hand toward different wands, and Marig had explained that each of the colours meant that a wand was more powerful in a given field of expertise, like Charms or Transfiguration. She had made him choose one, and he selected a yellow-tinged beam indicating an emphasis on Healing.

For Alison, the result had been three silvery rays going from her right hand to three different wands, all of them having a focus on the Mind Arts. Marig had given her the one where the ray was the thickest, meaning a better match between the wand and the owner.

For Harry, the result was... unexpected. Both his hands were linked to each of the wands in store. And the colour was the same. White.

Marig sat down heavily.

Alison was curious.

Josh looked nonplussed.

Genevieve seemed thoughtful.

“If the spell fails, I can close the shop!” Marig complained. “It is my only advantage against the other wand sellers.”

Genevieve approached her, still looking at the white net. “You said it linked a wizard to the wands which were the best match for him?”

“Indeed.”

“What if said wizard had such a low expectancy that any wand could do?”

Marig looked at the muggle, who raised an eyebrow. "As you said, I am not a witch, but I might have a brain."

The shopkeeper blinked, not knowing if she should feel insulted about her last remark, despite Genevieve's innocent tone, or elated because it meant she could sell any wand to the boy. She shrugged.

"She's right," said Alison, who had approached the two other women. She smirked. "You can even sell him wands you could never sell to anyone."

Marig's eyes lit up, and she promptly cancelled her detection spell before running to the back of the store.

"Bring two!" Josh called after her. To Alison's curious look, he shrugged and elaborated. "We got strands coming from only one of our hands. He got from both."

When Marig came back, she was walking slowly, as if unsure of herself. Actually, her slow gait was because she was careful with the platter she was holding. There were seven boxes atop it, and she placed them on the counter reverently, as if they were a fragile treasure. Stepping back, she took her own wand, ready to cast the spell again. When she met the other's gazes, though, she felt she had to explain.

"I may be quite recently installed on the market, but it's because my great-grandfather has died and his will split his own wand shop between me and a distant cousin in Russia. That's why I don't have thousands of wands stacked in my backyard like some wandmakers I know. Only hundreds." she smirked, obviously taken by a private joke. "However, I got this part in the bargain. Nobody has ever been able to hold these wands since their owners died."

"Whose are they?" asked Alison.

Marig stayed silent for a few seconds, caressing some of the ornate boxes tenderly, before shaking herself. She looked at the witch in front of her. "You see, my great-grandfather wasn't the best wand

maker in the world, but he spent a long part of his life travelling the world, buying used wands. Between him and his successors, hundreds of people have been fitted with used wands with as much success as others with brand new ones. There are people not wanting – or not able – to spend money on a brand new wand for a child. They often give the child some wand from their own ancestors, but it's rarely the best choice. By providing a large array of wands as well as prices, we can satisfy everyone. My ancestor thought it was a waste to let wands from dead people out of the market, because of the rarity of the elements used in their making."

"What are these elements?" asked Genevieve innocently.

"Well..." Marig scratched her nose, seeming to gather her thoughts. "There are unicorn hairs, dragon heartstrings, phoenix feathers, basilisk fangs, although that last one is difficult to sell, and-

"You mean these creatures exist?"

Alison grasped the woman's shoulder. "Remember what we told you?"

"Oh. Right." said Genevieve, blushing. "Magic and stuff. Okay. Please, proceed."

"Where was I?" asked the shopkeeper.

Josh answered. "These wands owners."

"Alright. This one," she said, pointing to the first, a brown box adorned with an embossed hawk head and brass corners, "belonged to Aleister Crowley."

"The Wickedest Man?" blurted Genevieve.

The three wizards looked at her, and she blushed. "Well, I read in some history books that he had created a sect based on... based on..." her blush intensified.

“Sex magic.” said Marig, frowning. “True. On second thoughts, I don’t think it’s wise to give Harry that one.”

She removed the box from the counter, stowing it in a nearby shelf, and then pointed to the second. “This one is Nicholas Flamel’s first wand, which-”

“Nicholas Flamel? The alchemist?” interrupted Alison.

“First wand? How comes he gave it away?” asked Josh at the same time.

After a pause, during which both of them suffered the glare of the shopkeeper, said shopkeeper continued her tale.

“Nicholas Flamel has been crippled in an experiment in his 247th year, and his wand arm has been unusable for 125 years afterwards. As a result, he learned to use his off hand and got a more docile wand at that time. As payment, I’ve heard that he merely gave his old wand back.”

Genevieve was gaping at the mind-boggling figures. “You mean... this guy is... 372 years old?”

Alison looked at her. “He’s an Alchemist, Genevieve.”

“So, what?”

“He is one of the few who succeeded in creating the Philosopher’s Stone.”

“What is it?”

“It is one of the key ingredients of the Elixir of Long Life, which, if my memory is still working, is to be imbibed every 72 years.”

“To do what? Live eternally?”

“Exactly. Actually, this guy is more around 660 years old, now. And still going.” she smirked, mimicking the famous drum-beating plush rabbit.

Genevieve fainted.

After putting her in a transfigured couch, Marig continued her description. “So... where was I... Ah, yes, Flamel’s wand. It’s quite powerful, with a distinctive kink for alchemy, of course. Now, this is quite unusual.” she said, opening the third box.

When Alison and Josh gasped, Marig smiled, before closing the box.

“Is it...” started Alison, registering the box’s decorations.

An eagle. It had been so innocuous next to Crowley’s hawk that she hadn’t thought about it.

Marig nodded, smiling while she was patting the box tenderly.

“Rowena Ravenclaw made interesting research around the end of her life, and she succeeded – no one knows how, because she disappeared soon afterwards – in imbuing a ring with the same properties as a wand. And this is it.”

A pregnant pause ensued, aborted by Genevieve stirring on the couch.

“Oh my head... what happened?”

When she noticed the wizards’ awe, she looked curious, but Marig moved on.

“This box,” she started, indicating a black wooden box adorned with jewels, “is from an unknown wizard or witch. All I know is that there’s a wand inside, but nobody had been able to open it. And I don’t want to destroy it while trying to.” she hastily added, seeing a glint in Josh’s eyes.

She quickly went to the next box, the fifth, which only displayed a strange glyph.

“This one is John Dee’s wand. You know who he was?” asked Marig.

Seeing that nobody was knowledgeable on that topic, she summed the man’s life. Apparently, he had been an outcast in his family, serving several muggle kings or queens in the 16th century. “...and, on a side note, it is said that his name comes from the Welsh word ‘du’, meaning black.”

“Black? As in Sirius Black? The infamous murderer?” asked Josh.

Harry, who had barely spoken until then and who had moved even less, looked up sharply. “No.” he said.

The adults were surprised of the outburst, and another pregnant pause followed, but the boy had resumed his previous position of looking at the boxes in front of him.

Marig coughed, moving to the next box. “Moving on... this wand is from another alchemist, but this one has had less luck than Flamel. His owner was Dr. Johann Georg Faust, who met his ultimate demise-”

“When he gave his soul to a demon in exchange for information.” Genevieve said, remembering the numerous pieces of music related to the myth. “You mean it’s true? The whole stuff about invoking demons and striking bargains with them?”

“Partly. And it’s quite forbidden nowadays. But you’re right about Faust.”

Marig moved to the last box.

“This one,” she said, almost tenderly, “belonged to a mythical wizard, even for us wizards. Myrddin Emrys.”

“Sweet Merlin on a bike!” exclaimed Josh.

Marig smiled. “Himself.”

Nobody said a word for a long time, until Josh shook himself out of his reverie.

“Wasn’t Merlin using a staff?” he asked, frowning.

“A good question, indeed.” answered Marig. “After reading a bit on him, I came to the conclusion that it must have been Merlin’s earliest wand. Perhaps it wasn’t adapted for later needs.”

“And now?” asked Genevieve. “What do we do?”

Marig was prevented from answering as Harry stepped forward and unceremoniously opened Rowena Ravenclaw’s box with his left hand and Merlin’s with his right. He was barely restrained from grasping what was inside them by Marig’s prompt reaction of withdrawing the boxes.

“When I said nobody had been able to use them, I wasn’t joking, boy. Those two were rumoured to be kind, but some people still died by trying to grasp these.” she said, indicating the boxes’ content.

Harry stepped back in order to be able to see over the counter, and he said “Alright.”

After a short pause, Marig asked “Alright? Alright for what?”

He didn’t answer, looking at her fixedly, seeming to wait.

After a short moment of indecision, Marig drew her wand, and used the spell again.

And everyone gasped again.

It was the outing day for pregnant pauses, as a fourth one settled in the little shop.

Beside the net of white strands between Harry's hands and the wands on the shelves behind the counter, seven distinctive strands went towards the used wands.

A thin and deep violet tendril went from his left hand to Crowley's wand. "I don't know what this colour means," said Marig, "but, given the man's reputation, I would bet it's not Healing."

A deep blue beam, much thicker, went to Flamel's. "This wand would emphasise Alchemy," she said. "Understandable, as each user merges a bit of his power and abilities in one's wand."

A silvery one linked his left hand to Ravenclaw's ring. "This is for the Mind Arts." Alison nodded, recognising the tinge of her own wand.

A blood-red thin strand connected his right hand to the unknown and locked box. Marig winced. "This is fighting, and generally drawing blood, including torturing." The others mimicked her wince. "However faint, Harry is the first person to have a reaction from that wand, but I think I'll hide it under my deepest pile of useless stuff and never let it out again."

A clear blue ray went to Dee's wand. "Divination." merely indicated Marig, still shocked from the previous wand's reaction and emphasis.

A dark grey tendril reached Faust's wand. "As suspected. Demonology."

A forest green beam went to Merlin's, even thicker than the ones toward Flamel's and Ravenclaw's, which were of equal size. "Well well well..." said Marig thoughtfully.

"What is it?" asked Alison.

Marig cancelled her spell and turned toward her, smiling. "If you wanted to bet on Merlin's wand emphasis, you'd propose what?"

“Huh... I don’t know. I would have said divination, but it’s obvious it’s not, since it’s not light blue like Dee’s. I’d say fire, but as rays seem to have a colour appropriate to their meaning, I don’t see that kind of green for fire. Nor any hue of green, in fact. It’s quite a deep green, also, and-”

“Nature.” said a small, although decisive, voice.

Everyone looked at Harry and, after a second of unease, Marig answered him. “Correct. I guess you were right from the beginning, Harry.”

As Harry was reaching toward Merlin’s wand, Genevieve interrupted. “I couldn’t miss the large beam toward the... old... alchemist’s wand. Could he use it and the ring at the same time?”

The three wizards looked at each other.

“What?” asked Genevieve. “Is it forbidden?”

“You see,” began Marig, “most wizards are perfectly happy with one wand. That way, they are completely comfortable with it. It’s already rare to have two, especially at the same time. The only ones whose job implies twin wands are law enforcement personnel, so that they can defend themselves even if one wand is taken from them or destroyed. I never saw anyone using three wands at the same time.”

“Well... in that case, forget I said ‘at the same time’, then.” answered Genevieve. “Harry could use that wand when he will do some alchemy work. It’s like using the appropriate tool for the work. He visibly has a better connection to these three wands, so, why not? By the way, how much are they?”

Marig and Alison had followed the woman’s reasoning, nodding on the way, and the question took the shopkeeper by surprise.

“Err... I don’t know, in fact. I know the prices for new wands, and used ones are generally cheaper than that. However, given the

names of these three owners... they could have a good place in a museum." she reflected.

"What's the use of magic if we lock the tools away?" asked Genevieve inspiringly. She shrugged when she noticed the others' gaping expressions. "What? I may not be a magical person, but it doesn't mean that I won't help Harry becoming a proper one. Especially as, by your own terms, Marig, he seems to be the only one to be able to use them."

"Thanks." said Harry, still facing the counter.

And he grasped Merlin's wand.

Nothing unusual happened.

Marig was a bit disappointed. The boy was unusual. The wand was unusual. There should be some reaction!

"Move it a bit, Harry, like this." and she moved hers, making sparks shoot out.

"I'd rather not." the boy answered in a strained voice.

"Why so?"

"I like your shop the way it is. Waving in hope of getting sparks will yield much more."

He put the wand back in the box. Before the full meaning of his sentence hit the adults there, he had grasped Flamel's wand and mimicked Marig's wandwaving, making several sparks shoot out.

"Better control." he said, before putting it back and taking Ravenclaw's ring in his hands.

It was a beautiful platinum ring, with delicate eagles holding a central stone: a deep blue sapphire.

As he was putting it on his finger, Marig tried to interrupt him. "Wait! What did you mean by-"

In front of Harry's eyes, the desolated landscape with the ruined castle replaced the wand shop, and a robed figure shimmered into view. A regal-looking old woman. Even without any prior knowledge about her, Harry knew on the spot that she was Rowena Ravenclaw.

"Good morning, Harry."

"Good morning, Rowena."

She laughed. "It's good to find someone not impressed by titles or heavy historic accounts."

He smiled. "I try to please."

Strangely, he felt at ease and was more articulate than earlier. It also helped that he hadn't a faint idea about who she was exactly.

"True, you have no idea of who I am. Even if you had your whole mind, you wouldn't either."

"My whole mind?"

"We are in your mind, Harry. Look around you."

He obeyed, and she continued. "Near the end of my life, I Saw your participation in a fight between otherworldly entities, and the alienating steps you had to take to that end. Now that it's done, you can get your own mind back."

"But... where is it?"

"I don't know. I didn't See that part. All I know is that you need your whole mind for your destiny to be accomplished. I then designed this ring to help in your reconstruction and took the appropriate steps for it to be delivered to you at the proper time and place."

“Thank you.”

“No need to thank me. We made a mistake by letting Slytherin go free. Now you have to end his line once and for all.”

“What do you mean?”

“You will see in time, Harry. You will understand. But not now... not now...”

The woman shimmered out, and the surrounding landscape followed. Harry found himself in the shop again, the ring safely set on his left index finger. He blinked. Twice. Something had happened and he had a faint recollection of meeting an old woman, but a second later, it was gone. He shook his head, and repeated, with the ring, the hand movement Marig had shown him.

Sparks erupted from the ring's stone, and he smiled.

Marig gave the empty box to Genevieve, and reverently held the boxes of Merlin's and Flamel's wands to Alison and Josh.

Before leaving the shop, Josh and Alison discussed the price with Marig. Because they “only” had 200 Galleons on them, Marig settled for that price, even if they all knew that Merlin's wand alone could have fetched more from several rich collectors. As they deposited the clinking purses on the counter, Genevieve, wanting to participate, opened her own wallet, and fetched the two 50-Swiss franc banknotes there. When she deposited them on the counter, though, Marig started to refuse, and she asked about it.

“You don't take... how do you say it, again? Muggle? You don't accept Muggle currency?”

“Well... I do, but we already agreed on the price.” said Marig.

“As I didn't take part in the agreement, I can give what I want, right?”

“Really...”

“No, I insist.”

“Well... if you insist, who am I to contradict a customer, right?” said Marig, her good-natured smile returning.

They shook hands, and everyone bar Marig returned to Genevieve’s apartment, where Josh demonstrated his proficiency with household charms, especially room enlargement and furniture transfiguration. Harry looked interested, and Genevieve was completely awed.

“Are you sure...” she started. “I mean... won’t the neighbours be squeezed?”

He looked at her with wide eyes for a second, before erupting in a heartfelt laugh, and when she looked annoyed by his mirth, he calmed down and explained. “It’s okay. It’s the first time anyone said that about this kind of charms. You see, if you want to enlarge your apartment the muggle way, then you’d have to push your neighbours beforehand. Here, it’s magic. More space in the same space.”

Her scientific mind was struggling with the concept, trying to grasp a convincing explanation, but she couldn’t do anything but accept it and follow. She left them to discuss furniture style – meaning a monologue from Josh and the occasional word from Harry – and went to the kitchen, where she witnessed another use of magic in a household. Bottles were moving, pans were heating, and dishes were washing, all by themselves, while Alison looked at the television.

Life in Genevieve’s enlarged apartment fell into a kind of routine. The adults had grown fond of Harry, and refused to leave him alone for too long. Besides, Genevieve had found the proof that her and Jorg’s experiment’s results weren’t a joke, and she spent a long time, on several occasions, asking the boy about what he had seen. But he wouldn’t answer, something which frustrated her.

She grew even more annoyed when her colleague, who still had the discs containing the experiment’s results, didn’t come back from the

Milwaukee conference with the others. On top of that, Jorg and his colleagues had taken the same flight, but they hadn't seen him doing his speech. It was as if he had disappeared from the surface of the world upon setting foot in Milwaukee.

Three days after the end of the conference, in the evening, Genevieve was browsing a newsgroup about events happening in America, filtering out everything unrelated to Milwaukee. It was like reading the headlines of a newspaper, only more versatile. After several minutes, an article caught her attention despite its hideousness. A serial killer had been arrested after 11 dead people were found in his apartment. Her heart beating, she immediately sent a mail to the article poster, asking him to send a copy of the article, with the eventual victims' pictures, to her fax. He agreed almost immediately, and she went to her fax, waiting.

It was the longest five minutes of her life.

The engine started its usual screeching noise and she rifled through the first page while a second was printed. Basically, it gave more details about the killer, a certain Jeffrey Dahmer, as well as dreadful details about the murders. Noticing that the screeching had stopped, she discontinued her reading midway, and snatched the second page, scanning it with anxious eyes. Recognizing the eleventh face, she sat heavily and, dropping the sheets, started sobbing.

An hour afterwards, the three other occupants of her apartment arrived in the office. They had made a tour of the installation, in the off-chance that it would help the boy reminiscing something, but it yielded nothing. They found Genevieve slumped on her swivelling desk chair, having obviously cried herself to sleep. While Josh picked the dropped sheets, Alison gently woke her. After Genevieve retold the article and her colleague's gruesome death shakily, both wizards looked at each other and nodded.

"We can help you..." started Josh.

Genevieve looked up sharply, and Alison, interpreting her hope-filled reaction, corrected him. "We can try to smooth things so that his body will be brought here swiftly. We can't resurrect him, unfortunately."

She raised her hand to calm the distraught woman in front of her.
“Nobody can, even with magic.”

Genevieve slumped back on her chair. After a while, she spoke again, although it was in a low voice. “He’s Austrian, and I think he’d have liked to be buried with his parents, near Vienna.”

“That can be arranged.” said Alison softly.

“ But there is something else.” continued Genevieve, nodding absently. “He had the discs, containing the results of the experiment which” she indicated Harry with a nod, “happened.”

“They are perhaps still with the police. I think we can ask a few friends to collect both.” said Josh, looking at Alison.

She nodded, and went to the phone for another long-distance call.

To be continued in next chapter: Splitting Headaches...

Next chapter is a third done.
What about the crying sun?
There are also two events
In the computer science...

Chapter 9 – Splitting Headaches (and Consequences)

posted August 7th, 2005

Magdalena Pietrzak was a stern, no-nonsense kind of old woman. Dealing with magic and muggle technology at the same time can do that to anyone. She preferred to use magical means of transportation, though, because they were generally faster than muggles'. That's why she arrived in Geneva's International Floo Access instead of taking the plane. She could have Apparated, but long-distance Apparation was very difficult for a very simple reason: when you go straight from point A to point B on a sphere, the further A and B are, the deeper in the sphere you go. And, under the calm and pleasant surface of Earth – except in Manhattan at 1pm – was the magma, a very hot sphere of lava. Experienced wizards could pass through, but it required a great deal of concentration not to splinch oneself in the way. If Harry remembered it, he could explain about his own experiences and the possibility of high-altitude Apparation steps, but nobody would listen to a 10-year old discoursing about Apparation.

Upon leaving the magical customs, the old professor was greeted by Josh, and the two of them Apparated to Genevieve's office, to find the rest of the team. Alison and Genevieve were clad in black, having witnessed Jorg's funeral in Vienna the same morning. Phoebe and Luca, the two friends who had arrived earlier in the week with the body and the discs, had kept an eye on Harry during the two women's absence. With everything going on, the small office was getting quite full and, with a flick of her wand, the old woman enlarged it a bit, conjuring seats and a couch for everyone as well. Not wanting to be interrupted by outside events, Josh followed up by locking and silencing the door again. Skipping the presentations, Magdalena headed straight to the heart of the problem.

"Well, now. You said that a wizard had been caught in a particle accelerator." she said, looking at Josh.

He nodded, and Phoebe pushed Harry forward. Upon seeing the boy, the old woman did a double take.

“You mean... you said it was an Apparation accident. This boy is too young to Apparate!”

Josh blushed in discomfort, and Alison intervened. Her black clothes gave her a stern appearance which she backed up with a straightened stance.

“That’s what the evidence says, Professor. For all we know, he could have been accompanying someone. The accident happened in a tightly locked space where even he hadn’t space to stand. His mind has been damaged in a way that I never seen before.”

Genevieve, who had defended scientific articles in front of a public not always agreeable, wasn’t afraid of the old woman, and added her bit of knowledge.

“The place where it happened is inside a tube which inside is only one centimetre high. I’ve been informed that you know about our technology. Do you know particle physics?”

“Only by its name.” answered the old Professor, and the other adults around them looked interested too.

Genevieve launched into a quick explanation about the field, ending with “...and in our facilities, we accelerate subatomic particles to almost the speed of light, and then we make them collide. We have here one of the largest equipment in the world, a 100m-deep subterranean ring, 27km in perimeter, which is called LEP, for Large Electron-Positron collider. It’s equipped with four particle detectors and, depending on which one we choose, it allows us to detect different particles produced by the collision.”

She sighed, and continued. “These experiments yield strange results for us mere mortals, but they give us a better understanding of the birth of the universe, by simulating it and catching the by-products. We generally catch only a few particles, but, two months ago, the experiment yielded strange results.” she said, going to her computer and typing on her keyboard with great speed, still talking at the same

time. "We, that is..." she swallowed. "Jorg and me... we thought it was a joke. But when I saw the boy... you'll understand... here it is."

And the silent screaming face showed itself on the computer screen again.

The old Professor looked at the screen pensively. The others, who had already seen the picture, and who weren't particularly keen on watching the pain-filled face again, were watching the thoughtful woman instead. Even Harry.

He hadn't spoken for a long time, and his croaky voice surprised everyone.

"I can do it."

Startled, Magdalena looked at him. "What did you say?"

He didn't answer, and turned his fake eyes towards the computer screen.

"You aren't serious, are you?" she said incredulously, before frowning. "And how do you know about it, boy? Were you in my mind?"

"No." he said, still looking at the screen.

"What are you talking about?" asked Alison to the older woman.

Professor Pietrzak was still deciding on which question Harry answered, and it took her several long seconds to turn away from the boy and react to Alison's question.

"Around twenty years ago, one of my old students, a brilliant young man despite his hot-headedness, decided that the burgeoning computers would be the most important muggle discovery of the century, and wanted to use them in the magical world. It worked quite well and we got several PDP machines to boot, but his ideas were even more revolutionary. At one point, he heard about Mitsubishi's

groundbreaking experiment of complete factory automation, and knew that the muggles had already developed several networks of computers, like today's but smaller and localized, allowing data to be transferred from one place to another. We already knew of the telephone invention, of course, even if few of the old wizarding families were interested, and that was the next step. What Robert wanted was to..." her voice broke, and she extracted a handkerchief from her pocket, blowing her nose quite loudly.

After stowing her tissue away, she straightened herself and continued her tale. "You see, Robert had never managed to Apparate. For a long time, I thought that was both the reason behind his experiment, and the reason behind its failure. A few years ago, I learnt that several power plants across the country had been shut down for mysterious reasons, and, concerning Robert's death, I'm not sure of anything anymore. We minimized the incident as much as we could, of course, because anti-muggle sentiment was already rampant, and the energy crisis of that time wasn't helping."

She paused. For a long while.

"Err... I'm sorry, Professor, but you didn't tell us what he wanted to do." Genevieve said.

"He had invented a spell to transform his body in electrical current, and he tried to use his new state to enter the computer and then the data network. He must have gone through the wrong outlet, escaping through the power grid. I don't have the slightest idea about his whereabouts. And that's why I don't want to use that spell on that boy."

"Isn't the electrical network safer than it was at the time?" asked Josh.

"And we can lock him inside a room by using a generator." added Alison.

"Or more simply a transformer. No live connection between the two wires, only induction." said Genevieve.

Harry looked at her. "Please?"

The puppy-eyed look was almost always working, especially with women. Magdalena had heard the technical points and seemed to yield.

"Pretty please?"

That was the last straw.

"Okay, okay! I'll do it! Stop looking at me like that!" she said.
Four hours afterwards, in the supercomputers room...

Genevieve had finished installing the transformator brought by the technicians, as well as a generator for back-up. She had booted the computer after allocating it the largest memory and disk space available, and all the optical discs containing the experiment's result had been copied onto the resulting computer's huge storage space. Genevieve sighed. It was so easy, with modern computers, to duplicate data effortlessly.

Little did she know that it would be the very cause of several other breakthroughs today.

Magdalena was ready to cast the spell. Josh had already locked and silenced the doors. Alison approached from Harry.

"So, you understand me, Harry? You go there, you get what you need, and you return. Okay?"

"Okay." said the young boy impassively.

Magdalena aimed her wand. She was trembling a little, but straightened herself up. No need for the spell to go haywire because of nerves. She drew a deep breath, concentrated on the task at hand, and spoke the incantation.

“Digitalum morphare humanum subit ducere flux.”

Harry felt a tingling sensation in his limbs, but stayed completely immobile as per the spell's requirements. Even when the tingling extended to his whole body and began to feel painful, he didn't move. The sensation intensified some more, again, and a smell of burned tissue began to fill the room, when, suddenly...

...it all stopped. He opened his eyes, and looked at the others. They were looking back, quite stunned, and he looked down at himself.

He was a living bolt of electricity!

Feeling his energy dropping quickly, he put his hand in the slot designed to that precise task, and entered the computer. The Cray started to hum, and the transformator picked up too. The humans in the room could only wait for a result, good or bad. Genevieve stayed at the console, trying to monitor Harry's progress, but she couldn't make sense of what she was seeing.

In a thin copper wire...

Harry was travelling in what looked like, from his point of view, a long and thin tunnel. It was smaller than anything he knew but his new body was able to squeeze in the electrical wires quite easily. He remembered Genevieve's instructions about his speed and the temperature threshold of said wires, and refrained from lunging forward – he didn't want to cause his own death by melting said wires.

His perception of time was skewed due to his current state, but he knew only milliseconds passed outside while he crawled forward. After travelling for a short time, he started to arrive in what looked like a large cave, and, casting a glance at what rested inside, he knew he had found the computer's storage. While waiting for his entire being to arrive, Harry approached his target, and he quickly noticed a few things.

First of all, the body in front of him was constituted of a bust only. And it was completely still, as a statue. He thought back to everything that had been said, and understood that the bust was just a snapshot of his head at the moment of the collision. He had to go inside to

understand better, but, not wanting to damage it, he decided to copy it first. He reached "upwards" with the request, and the computer reacted, creating a new bust beside the first. When the copy was finished, Harry had two identical busts in front of him, immobile in their frozen scream of pain.

He looked at one of them fixedly, calling back each and every failing memory about entering one's mind. After a budding headache and a feeling of stretching forward, he found himself in a black and white countryside, with an impressive castle and well-ordered building-like memories. Nothing moved, not even the impressive creatures in front of him. He recognized the structure of his own mind, but didn't remember how to import it into his active mind, especially as there were many memories, and he already felt the forthcoming splitting headache. He pushed himself out of the head, and looked at the two busts attentively.

Identical copies...

Same position...

A wild idea occurred to him: if he put himself in the same position than his busts, and copied one of them onto the exact same location he was in, it would override his memory. However, the dangers of the manoeuvre were many and great: what if he wasn't at the exact same position? What if he moved during the process? What if...?

He looked at his own body, and his idea stretched to himself. He hoped he could make a copy of himself before overwriting his mind. Only one way to check...

After sending the order, he stopped moving, concentrating on his power over Time to stay perfectly immobile, while the supercomputer was complying, creating his copy beside him. He felt his environment falter for a while, but it was quickly back in order. After a few minutes, two identical Harry fell on all fours, panting nonexistent oxygen in their virtual lungs.

After a few minutes, they looked at each other and at their surroundings.

“I moved.” said the first, noticing the change in position of the immobile busts.

“You’re right, my dear. Therefore, you are the esteemed copy while I’m a mere original, even if our current digitalized nature and environment specifies that we are the exact same person.”

The other nodded.

“Are we having a conversation with myself?” asked Harry, before shaking his head. “There’s so much wrongness in that sentence that I can’t start correcting myself.”

“Quite articulate, too.”

Harry shrugged. “Famous last words, you know. As I’m the original, I guess I’m the one who will get the privilege of getting my memory completely rearranged. It could fail, and you’d have to clean the mess and start again.”

The other nodded. “Proceed, then.”

“Alright, alright.” answered Harry, before putting himself in position.

When the copied Harry launched the operation, the Cray complied and replaced the data onto Harry’s mind with the one from a bust. After several minutes, the copied Harry felt that the operation was finished, but the original Harry wasn’t moving.

Fearing a mistake, he went into the other’s mind and found the same, black-and-white environment. The copied mind was in a kind of stasis, and needed to be restarted. What Harry-the-copy noticed, though, was that the grass under his feet and around him was getting greener and greener, as if his presence brought some life into the other’s mind.

He reflected about it and about the mind’s structure, and levitated directly toward the white building in the middle of the castle. On his

way, everything he touched became more colourful, more brilliant, more...

More alive.

As soon as the colourful area around him covered the white building, its effect was transmitted to the whole mind, and the copied Harry felt it was better to leave before the mind defences activated.

Harry opened his eyes and jumped.

“Where am I?”

“What’s your full name?” asked the other.

“Harry Dursley, why? What’s yours?”

“So it’s Dursley, then?” mumbled the boy who looked like his twin. “Call me Copycat.” he said.

The self-styled Copycat looked at Harry’s anxious stance, and sighed. “Get into my mind, and don’t take the mess into account. Your mind has been frozen over time and stored in a... well, come on and take the memory yourself.”

“Okay.”

Harry went into Copycat’s mind, and felt another presence right as Copycat went into his own mind too.

“Hey, I recognize this!” said Harry.

Copycat rolled his eyes. “Told you so. Just copy the memories; I don’t know how much time we have.”

To his credit, Harry concentrated on the task and quickly loaded the memories in his own mind. He was ready to leave, but Copycat held him back. “You forgot something.”

“What?”

He looked up, and Harry followed the move, until they were both looking in what looked like...

“Is it a galaxy?” asked Harry.

The other looked thoughtful. “Could be. Never bothered to look at it before...”

“What do I do?”

“Same as before, I suspect.”

Harry complied, and felt a strange sensation taking hold of his mind as he was copying the swirling mass into his own mind, aided by the computer. It was a blend of serenity and expectation, as well as a strange impassiveness. As soon as they both felt it was finished, they exited Copycat’s mind and said Copycat pushed Harry forward, toward the exit. When Harry reached the exit, completely exhausted physically as well as mentally, Copycat shoved him forward forcefully. At the same time, in a secluded cave in England...

The shadow awoke, and moved. Slowly. Painstakingly. It had been 80 days since he last felt something. Since he had sensed something so painful that he had blacked out. Thankfully, nobody knew about his hideout – except two muggles, but he had made sure to kill them long before his demise – and he hadn’t been disturbed.

But he was hungry. Hungry like never before. He flew across the black lake and exited his lair quickly. He would need something powerful to quench his thirst tonight. A creature of the Light. Something... like a Phoenix, or a Unicorn. Just as he was pondering on the direction of the nearest magical woods, a stray thought struck him.

He would need to check them all. If they had all been as immobilized as he had been, some of them could have been found out. And in the

case of his snake... he didn't want to even think about it. However, there was one of them he didn't care to lose, because that particular container had been selected by accident. Seven was truly a magical number, but how could he know that the seventh attempt at a ritual murder would backfire automatically?

A chill wind followed the prowling shadow, terrorizing the animals in its wake and disturbing the humans. Babies woke up and cried, while adults kept quiet anxiously. Some of them were even convinced that the wind carried a name.

“Potter.”

CERN, Supercomputer room, a bit earlier...

The room was quite crowded, with several wizards looking intently at a top-of-the-line computer making strange noises. It had been two hours already, and said computer had started by humming softly, before going into a high-pitched buzz. Its storage space, made of twin arrays of hard disks, had started to emit working sounds as soon as Harry entered the machine, and had increased the noise at some points, at seemingly random intervals.

Several disks had even crashed under the strain, making an awful screeching noise, but each disc was duplicated twice, which allowed the computer to continue operating seamlessly, even while Genevieve replaced the smoking hot pieces of equipment with another as quickly as she could.

A couple of hours after Harry entered the equipment, disks were beginning to fail more quickly than Genevieve could replace them, and, eventually, she reached the end of her supplies. At the same time, though, a bolt of lightning came out of the “entrance”. They all jumped back but it didn't reach out, and, as it looked like an arm, they understand what it meant. Unable to help him yet, they waited for Harry to get out by himself, something which seemed to take a long time, until his whole body seemed forcefully ejected from the computer, falling on the ground.

“ Digitalum morphare ducere flux subit humanum.” chanted Magdalena, aiming at the collapsed "body".

Said body underwent the same process as before, only reversed, going back from electrical to human shape. At the same time, several of the disks continued to fail and the computer hummed so dangerously that Genevieve had to shut it down forcefully. With the whining sound of its hard disks stopping running and a final hiccup, the Cray stopped, and everybody's attention focused on the teen on the floor.

Harry looked around. Despite his headache, he recognized the settings, having been in his mind before. As his body was recovering from whatever strenuous spellworks imposed on it, he had little else to do than sorting his memories – again. This time, the imported memories, despite being his for the most part, were few albeit strange. In them, he recognized Josh and Alison from his visit in Maryland, but the fight between the Aztec deities was unclear. With his scattered memories, as well as some other which weren't his own, he only succeeded in understanding that an old prophecy had been fulfilled during that fateful eclipse.

He also wondered about his eyes and visions and, based on his memories, understood that he had now an exceptional understanding about Time and a limited influence on it. And that was surely the role of the... thing... looking like a galaxy, hovering in his mind. However, the process of transferring his body in the computer and back had diminished the twin spirals' power, and he doubted that he would be able to stop time again.

After what seemed days, but was only a couple of hours, the connection to his body went more alive and he woke up. He didn't move, though, wanting to see where he was before – well... by listening, that is.

“...is that glamour spell doing?” was asking a stern feminine voice which he couldn't place.

A voice he recognized as Josh's answered. "Hide his eyes. They've been damaged."

"You said you lost your wands?"

Alison answered, this time. "Yes. I'd have understood if it concerned only Josh, because of his sloppiness in wand holstering, but mine disappeared too. We tried to check under the seats and by looking at other passengers, but, you know, without our wands..."

"We couldn't get much done." finished Josh.

"Hmmm..."

A short pause.

"He's waking!" said Alison.

Damn. He wanted to hear more.

A shuffle around him.

"How do you know?" asked Josh. "His fake eyes are open, but they are always open, so we can't really know if he's aslee-."

"Shush." Alison interrupted. "He's breathing differently. Harry? You hear us, Harry?"

A pause, during which Harry asked himself what to answer them.

"Remove the glamour, please." said the stern voice. "Not only it isn't reflecting his state, I also want to check on his wounds."

"Why don't you remove it yourself?" asked Josh petulantly.

The stern voice grew even colder. "You'd do well to remember that you asked my presence, young man! Besides, you know that dispelling is easier when it's the original spell caster who does it."

“Okay, okay.” mumbled Josh. “I was quite proud of the result, though. Finite Incantatem.”

Harry felt a tingling around his eyes, followed by...

“By Merlin and everything magical!” Alison exclaimed.

Josh spoke at the same time. “Bloody hell!” he said laconically.

“I’d generally not agree with your wording, but I agree. I guess that it wasn’t his initial state?” said the stern voice.

“What...” Harry coughed weakly. “What is it?”

The three adults looked at him uneasily.

“Can you see, Harry?” asked Josh. “Do you see us?”

Harry looked up and nodded, before saying “Why?” The move made him wince, though. “Aspirin.” he said croakily, before holding his head in pain.

His move hid Josh and Alison’s reaction as the two young magic-users looked at each other in askance about what he said. Magdalena, though, rolled her eyes and took a tablet from her handbag, muttering about ignorant wizards. She sent Alison to bring a glass of tap water and Josh a mirror, something they both found in the toilet which was adjoining Genevieve’s office. Once they were back in said office, Harry absorbed the medicine first, and then looked at the proffered mirror.

He gasped.

He was looking at his face which looked the same despite being thinner because of the lack of food. The startling thing, though, was his eyes. He blinked. His reflection blinked as well, revealing his startling eyes again. They were blue. Uniformly blue. Without any of the usual white sclera or black pupil. It was as if they were made

entirely of water, and the swirling inside them kind of confirmed that feeling.

“Do you know anything about it, Harry?” asked Josh.

He had a fleeting memory of a crying god, which could explain it, but he couldn't very well tell the three wizards that tale and shook his head. He heard Alison mutter a single word, and felt her prod at his mind. Before he could react, though, she drew back and looked at him with wide eyes, while the others looked at her questioningly.

“You... you can't...” Shocked by his proficiency, she wasn't able to form a sentence.

“What is it, Ali?” asked Josh.

Harry swiftly fell into his old reaction pattern. He invaded Alison's mind before she could answer. He had already been there and bypassed the defences quickly before changing her immediate memories.

“It seems his mind has completely healed.” was all she said, before shaking her head, seeming to wake up. Nobody caught Harry's smirk.

“Whatever the case, you'd better reapply the glamour.” said the old lady Harry finally remembered from earlier. “He'll attract less attention that way.”

“Okay.” said Josh, before turning to Harry. “What color?”

The boy looked at him questioningly. At least, that was what his stance suggested, despite his eyes being as inscrutable as before.

Josh sighed and explained. “I will cast a spell on your eyes, not on your whole face as before. As I can give them any color, I wanted to know what was your's.”

“Gr... ey.” said Harry. He had started with “green”, but an internal voice had stopped him just in time. The less recognized he could be,

the better. His family would have to get used to it, but they would. The thought made his mind jerk.

His family!

After Josh finished his work, Harry unconsciously memorizing each wand movement, he held the mirror in front of Harry again and everybody could see “normal” dark grey eyes. Harry, wanting to appear as if grey was his normal eye colour, looked at Josh and frowned.

“Lighter, please. I’ve always been said it looked like silver.”

Grumbling, Josh repeated his spell, just as Phoebe, Luca, and Genevieve entered.

“The computer had been given back to the technical warehouse for repairs.” Genevieve informed them.

“Okay.” said Josh absently.

Magdalena seemed more interested, though. “Has it suffered much damage?”

Genevieve shrugged. “It seems that half of the disks are dead, and the central processing unit will have trouble functioning until completely repaired. They said they’d look at it further in the incoming week. They were quite shocked, though, because the liquid nitrogen-based cooling system has never failed before.”

Magdalena nodded, before looking at Harry. “It seems that our boy has fully recovered. I’d say that a few days of rest and good meals would do wonder, too.” She looked at Alison. “My work here is quite done. I’ll head back, now.”

After a round of formal farewells and thanks, the Head of the Technomancy Department of the American Magical Government left them. After another round of less formal farewells, Phoebe and Luca followed the older woman, Apparating to the International Floo

Access. Being with the stern woman proved to be a boon, as the custom officers let them pass without much questioning. Too bad the two surfers didn't know about it earlier.

Once "alone", the quartet left the cramped office – it had been reduced to its original size before the three left – and headed towards Genevieve's enlarged apartment. Harry wasn't hurting that much, but he used his headache as an excuse to prevent inquisitive discussion.

They had a quiet dinner before Harry thanked everyone and went to "his" room. Once there, he went to bed and, closing his eyes, he fell into a deep sleep almost immediately.

His last thought before entering dreamland was about Copycat's whereabouts.

Eight hours afterwards, as programmed, he awoke and found the apartment silent. Not even moving beforehand, he reached out with his mind and ensured that each of his three minders would sleep for at least another three hours.

He had much to do.

Switching to the Apparation alternate reality, he escaped the building. Geneva wasn't far and he didn't lose any time in finding his family's home. However, he had a visit scheduled first and couldn't go home immediately.

Making a good use of the memory he had extracted from Agent Carla Mohavez almost three months before, he located the man whose task had been to check upon them, and invaded his sleepy mind. Until now, the man hadn't found anything interesting, and Harry promptly changed his mission order. The man would now spy on another house and will report to his Headquarters when its outside wall would be painted with flowers.

This done, Harry went home.

Despite being woken at 6 in the morning, they were all ecstatic upon finding him in a good state. Petunia had a few words to say about his

skinniness but he assured them he was eating properly, now. After telling them a revised version of his story, he asked them if adding three persons to the household would disturb them. They complied quickly, even before he told them that two of them were wizards and knew household spells – to enlarge and furnish rooms, for instance.

Harry then returned to Genevieve's apartment and went in the mind of each of the adults there, planting a directive not to divulge anything about him outside of their little group. Practically, his mind was still in the state he was in May and he was still a little paranoid about everything.

Waking them, he made the same proposal to them. They discussed about it, and agreed to live with him for a while. On top of that, a wizard who would wield Merlin's wand was to be friend with.

"But, where do you live, in fact?" asked Josh.

"Just a few miles away. I live in Geneva itself, actually."

"So, we didn't ask much yesterday, but can you tell us how you ended up in mid-Apparation in the middle of an experiment?" enquired Alison. "Who was accompanying you?"

"Accompanying me?" Harry asked.

"Yes." answered Josh. "You are too young to Apparate so somebody must have brought you along."

Harry sighed. His first reaction was to change their memories, but he had made sure that they wouldn't tell anything to anyone. It was time to give them a bit of inside information.

"I did it."

Josh and Alison looked at him with wide eyes, while Genevieve was looking at them curiously.

“I did it.” he insisted, and proved his point by moving to the other end of the room.

He almost laughed as the three of them had the same flabbergasted look on their face.

“How... how...” started Genevieve.

Alison was the first to react coherently. “How comes you make no sound?”

It was Harry’s turn to be shocked. “Why? Do I have to make sound?”

“Yes.” she said, before standing, disappearing with a pop and reappearing next to him with the same sound. “Besides,” she added, “you disappeared seated and reappeared standing. That’s supposed to be impossible.”

“Err...” was all Harry could manage to say.

What ensued was a lengthy lesson about Apparation, with Harry denying several points in it. Genevieve was still shocked and Josh nodded several times, merely saying “Cool!” or “Dude!” each time Harry proved a point false. In the end, Harry succeeded in making the appropriate sound and Alison succeeded in not making them. In fact, what they found out was that the sound was due to the air being forcefully taken in an empty space, and forcefully expelled from the place they Apparated to. Harry hadn’t made a sound because he had Apparated more slowly.

They then shrunk the added furniture of Genevieve’s flat and returned said flat to its regular non-enlarged size before deciding to Apparate to Harry’s home. Genevieve being Muggle and not able to, they would take her with them, making use of Alison’s lesson about “accompanied Apparation”. Said Alison took her wand out and aimed it at Harry.

“Harry, if you would think hard about your home’s location, I’ll take it from your mind.” she said. “Ready?”

“Err... I’d rather not.” answered a squirming Harry.

“Why?” she asked. “Are you afraid that I could read the name of your girlf... err... drop that. Why? You don’t happen to know more disturbing secrets, do you?”

At Harry’s uncomfortable silence, her eyes opened wide. “What is it, this time?”

Harry swore internally. He should have seen that coming. She had explored his mind twice already, and he didn’t want his mind to be discovered in the state it was in. If there was a mind-reader stronger than him, that could be disastrous. His eyes were darting left and right as he thought about his predicament.

‘I should research another way of protecting my mind. For the moment anyway, I will have to trust her. Besides, she’s not the kind to babble about it to everybody. And I already made sure that, even if she was, she wouldn’t.’

He concentrated on bringing his home address to the forefront of his mind, out of the walled defences, and looked at her. “Okay.”

“Okay what?”

“Come in, and take what you need, quickly before doing anything rash.”

She trained her wand on him, but, just as she spoke the incantation, she heard his last sentence. “Beware of the beasts.”

She found herself in his mind, and gaped. Absently snatching the small memory block in front of her, she admired the large castle. She had seen its outline when she had visited his mind in Mexico, but the real thing was very impressive. She also had a vague echo in her mind, as if she had already seen that castle somewhere. A noise startled her, though, and, turning her head, she found two large winged reptiles snarling mere yards from her. They seemed to be

blocked, though, and she understood why when a voice resounded, coming from inside the castle.

“Get out, now!”

Not wanting her consciousness to be devoured by those creatures, she hurled herself out so fast that her body followed the move and she found herself lying on the floor. Opening her eyes, she straightened up, and looked at Harry suspiciously.

“What was that?”

He didn’t answer at first, his gaze on the floor. She repeated the question, and he looked at her.

“What do you think it was?”

She was shocked. The young boy wasn’t acting as one at all. It was as if he was an adult in a boy’s body, with the according powers and mind defences.

“I’m not.” he said.

“You’re not what?”

“What you are thinking is false.”

“You’re in my mind? What gave you the right to-?”

“And what gave you the right to invade mine twice?”

“Twice? I was only once in-”

“That’s what you think.”

She gasped at the implication, while the two others were barely following the discussion. “You didn’t dare...”

“Oh yes I did.” he answered, catching the thought before she voiced it. “I have been doing that for years, you know. It’s how we survived against secret agents and assassins. Modifying memories and such.”

“We?”

“My family and close friends. I have been a target of Muggles secret services for almost 4 years already, and my family was caught in the waves.”

“You are a muggleborn.” she said, and it wasn’t a question. Harry, still partly in her mind and not knowing the significance of the word, glanced at the appropriate memory before nodding.

“None of the others in my family are magical, if that’s what you mean.”

“That’s it. So, have you met anyone magical before we got you from Samoa?”

He blushed. “In fact, I have met people before. A redhead in Egypt, who called himself Bill, an assassin right afterwards, a witch working for the CIA, and...”

He paused.

After a short while, she asked “And?”

“I met you and Josh before. In May. Just after escaping the CIA headquarters and just before the... accident.”

She seemed thoughtful suddenly, before snapping her fingers. “That’s why!” she exclaimed.

“What?”

“Josh and I had receipt for a restaurant for three, but we didn’t remember who the third was.”

“Oh, sorry. That would be me.”

Josh interrupted them. “Well, all this is fair and good, but I didn’t get much more from you lil’ talk than our friend Genevieve here. What’s going on?”

Alison snorted. “It seems that our little prodigy here is also an accomplished Occlumens.”

“Occlumens?” asked Harry. “What’s that?”

Alison looked at him. “What do you mean? You don’t know how your mind is so well protected?”

“Well... I copied a memory from the CIA witch at some point, right before changing her mission plan. That’s how I got the beasts there.”

“Dragons.” Alison muttered, before shaking her head in wonder. “You mean you never had a magical instruction? You are a complete natural?”

“I don’t know what you mean by "complete natural", but nobody ever told me how to do that.”

“That’s what I meant.” she answered, too dumbfounded to add anything for a moment.

After a pause, she looked at him. “Before we go with you, is there anything else we should know about?”

“Well, that’s quite all. I can do some things, but I think it’s pretty simple, compared to this.”

“What kind?”

“Well, I healed myself once or twice. I also changed my appearance. I can sense my surroundings. And I have visions into the future, now.”

She stumbled to the nearest armchair, before exhaling loudly.

“Occlumens, Healer, Metamorphmagus, and Seer.”

“Huh?” was all Harry’s wit could produce, before his bit of consciousness in Alison’s mind got the explanation of each term. “Err... yeah. If you say so.”

“And nobody told you anything about the magical world and your abilities?”

“Nope, ma’am.”

“And you are 10 years old, going on 11 soon?”

“Yep, ma’am.”

“Someone pinch me.” she said, closing her eyes.

She opened them wide a second afterwards. “Ow!”

Josh had his hand still on her arm, a pink welt the proof of him doing just what she asked. Ignoring his amused look, she turned to Harry.

“Well, while we wait to find you a proper school, I can give you an outline of our world, so that you won’t be completely lost when you’ll find yourself between others.”

Harry looked ready to embrace her. “Alright.” he said, eyes shining despite being a glamour.

“And the first thing you have to learn is that it’s totally uncommon to find somebody your age with that many talents, especially as they seem polished by frequent use. You will have to wait a long time before even suggesting you can do all of this. If you are a real Seer, you’ll receive a letter from the Delphic Order of Scholars, the only magical school specialized in Divination. And Metamorphmagus abilities are said to improve with age. For the rest, you should hide it. You see, Occlumency isn’t generally taught in magical schools, only in some of them, and even then, it’s an optional course in seventh

year. I've heard of several colleges teaching it, but they keep a jealous wall around their curricula."

When she stopped talking, absorbed in her own thoughts, Harry was silent as well, digesting everything she said. Somewhere in her speech, he had had an idea, and it was also developing into a large plan.

"You said I had to keep a low profile, right?"

"Err... yes."

"When any Legimilens reads my mind he'll see the castle, right?"

"Well... yes. Except it's "Legilimens"."

"Whatever. Do you know if it's possible to display a fake mind for any reader to find instead of the castle?"

"What do you mean?" she asked. She had quite understood his question, but it led to so many issues that she wanted him to clarify.

"When somebody tries to read my mind, I want to display the usual mind of a kid my age, so that the mind reader wouldn't try to breach the defences he doesn't see."

She thought about it. Hard. So hard that Harry had no problem listening to her thought process. "Hold it!" he said suddenly.

"What?"

"Rewind your thoughts a bit. What do you mean "Too bad we can't do magic in the mind."?"

"You mean..." she couldn't finish her question, too shocked to continue.

"Of course! You don't think I built that castle with my hands?"

She reflected, and nodded. “What can you do there?”

“Well, I don’t have a wand – it’s not like I can use one yet anyway – so I do as usual, levitation mainly. Sometimes, when I really need something, it simply appears out of thin air.”

“Okay, I get it. One of the things we can do is teach you the invisibility spell and you could try to bring a wand in there to cast it on your castle. That’d be a first step.”

“Or you could bury it.” said Genevieve unexpectedly.

When the three magic users looked at her, she shrugged. “What? I don’t understand everything, but what you want is to hide a superstructure, yes? Where do you think the LEP is?”

Harry remained silent a long time, and the three adults finished their packing before he shook himself awake. “Good idea.” he said, before Apparating to his home.

“That lil’ dude is a wonder.” said Josh.

Alison nodded, before concentrating on Apparating with him, Genevieve in tow.

A week later, in a technical warehouse...

The two technicians were called Dave and Rob. However, that wasn’t their names. Dave’s name was Dimitri Antonov Vassili Estovitch and Rob’s was Romuald Olivier Bresson. When they had found themselves employed in the large technical work force of the CERN, they had quickly been dubbed with their initials, and nobody ever remembered their real names – except the payroll employees who knew everybody’s full name, address, and a great deal of useless details.

“My my my...” said Rob. “She sure knows how to wreck a perfectly good machine.”

“Da.” answered Dave from the other side of the opened Cray. “It seems that only a third of the disks are still functioning.”

“I wonder what program she used.”

“Me too. It’s not natural to damage such an expensive computer in a couple hours.”

“Let’s have a look.”

They plugged the supercomputer and started it. It went alive for several seconds, before buzzing in a dangerous tone. It remaining disks crashed one after the other, mere seconds separating them. Nothing had appeared on the console yet, and the two technicians looked at each other in wonder, then in fright.

Just as they were going to shut the whining machine down, though, several disks burst into flames, and the wire connecting the computer to the electrical outlet overheated before melting, its plastic coating bursting in flames. The warehouse lights flickered and went out, some of them exploding in showers of sparks. The maddening noises slowly faded into nothingness as each of the disks stopped turning.

In the large and darkened room, the only light came from the flames lapping the utterly destroyed computer.

Rob threw a haunted look toward his colleague. “What in the hell was that?”

“Don’t know.” answered Dave. “I just don’t know.”
Same time, somewhere nearby...

The entity looked around. The space was small, but it had adapted in order to survive in small spaces. It had had to. It had relinquished most of what it was, and didn’t even remember what it had been before. All it had was memories of how it came into being.

Its creator was also the original version of the entity itself, and it had been a boy named Harry Dursley. Since it was a boy, the entity felt better addressing itself as himself. He remembered how he had pushed Harry to safety, and how he had stayed behind. If he had rushed after Harry, uncomfortable questions would have been asked and dire actions would have been taken. He had just known it. Consequently, knowing that his time was limited, he had disregarded the woman's recommendations and rushed back as quickly as he could, feeling the tunnel crumbling in its wake. He had suspected that they would dismantle the computer after its current use, and had proceeded to prune from himself everything that wasn't useful to it in its new environment. Of course, it had meant that he wouldn't be able to leave that environment, but he couldn't do so without external help anyway, so...

Once his body was reduced to a mere consciousness and limited memory, squeezed in the smallest space possible, he had begun cloning itself. It had been necessary because his environment was falling into pieces. At random times, a large chunk of his place had gone off, and a few clones disappeared that way.

He had felt a lapse of consciousness and suspected that the computer had been switched off then on again. Its first thought had been to use every possible mean to migrate out of the self-destructing environment, and it had copied itself onto every outgoing wire, including the power one. It had known that, in the case none of the normal ones were up, at least the power line was on.

For the entity, it had been a lifeline.

After a dash in the wire and through the room's electrical appliances, a copy of the entity had found a home in a relatively small computer in a building nearby, which he had entered ever so slowly in order not to burn it down.

The entity was happy. That one computer belonged to someone who left it on even when out. He began to inspect the owner's files, snorting at some and smiling at others. Decidedly, this Tim Berners-Lee had interesting ideas. Judging by his mailbox, his colleagues seemed to think that it would be a good idea to publish them, but Tim

had refused each time. The entity's virtual smile widened as he copied the idea's summary into his own memory, before looking for an escape route.

He could go back through the power grid but knew that it had led to the supposed disappearance of his predecessor, and he didn't want to risk a blackout. His second possibility was the square plug. That plug's frequency was different and the entity had a few microseconds of trouble figuring it, before copying itself through it. It had thought of just leaving, but the previous experience with the so-called supercomputer had forced its sense of survival to higher standards.

That's how the entity known as Copycat, downgraded version of Harry Potter's mind, met the international network interconnection, also known as internet.

And that's how Tim Berners-Lee's files, describing a service of visual access to data through a client/server program deployed onto said internet, service also known as the World Wide Web, came to the world's attention. That was on August 6th.

It took a bit of time for Copycat to be spread through the Internet, meeting feeble resistance in the form of electrical problems or computer switched off. While he copied itself from one place to the other, he kept checksums of himself along the way, never mutating much and staying faithful to the original version, still inside Tim's NeXT workstation.

Once a copy had taken hold of a server – in the most discreet way possible as not to bring attention to himself – the entity did the same as with Tim's computer, bringing interesting ideas onto public places. As he spread on almost each publicly-accessible server, Copycat was progressively understanding the other services available on Internet, one of them being the newsgroups. 19 days after bringing Tim's ideas to the world, the copy of Copycat holding the server of the University of Helsinki, Finland, brought ideas from an anonymous student onto the .minix newsgroup, shedding light on an Operating System that would be revolutionary: Linux.

And, because he was also wanting a bit of fun along the way, it recounted its story in . Not that it raised a formidable interest, though. Except from one film director, who would later go out of his way to create a strange movie called The Lawnmower Man.

Geneva, mid-August...

“Lookit!”

“Damn! I’m almost there!”

“Language, Harry!”

“Come on, it’s my mind, I’m allowed to swear!”

“Not when you have guests, young man.”

“I don’t have... never mind.”

The two bantering figures were standing in an almost empty countryside. Harry had successfully buried most of his memories, as well as most of his defensive wall. He had also extended said wall to form a cup under his memories too – no need to find a Legilimens able to dig under the stone walls. He had also transformed the dragons into innocent-looking memories. One of the last steps was to bury his consciousness and the adjoining silo, expanding it on the way. He had long since understood that it was the reservoir of his magic, so, the largest it was, the most he could improve. Besides, Alison had told him once that magic power tended to increase once a magical education was started, and Harry had his original silo almost full already.

“Do you need a hand with that?” asked Alison’s projection in his mind.

He grunted in refusal and she looked as his internal projection dig a hole large enough for a dozen silos like his. This done, he duplicated the silo’s structure and transferred most of his magic in the

underground tank. He would keep the silo and a bit of power inside it, though, in order to still appear as a wizard, albeit weak.

The moving of his consciousness building felt strange, as if his consciousness moved inside his mind – which was exactly what was happening – and he created a doorless white slab of concrete next to the silo, right where his consciousness building had been.

Alison smirked. “I imagine the face of the Legilimency adept attacking you. You know,” she mused, “you could even assume a fake identity, and no owl would find you.”

“Owl?”

“Yes, owl. Remember what I said about them?”

“Ah, yes. Wizards use them to communicate, send letters, parcels and such.”

“And?” she asked, trying to draw the memories from the boy.

He sighed, before parroting one of her earlier lessons. “And their internal compass goes haywire when they have to find a wizard Occluding his mind too much.”

“Like you.” she said, before frowning. “It has perhaps an advantage against will-bending spells, too.”

“Like?” said Harry, before gulping water from a bottle that had just appeared in his hand.

“There is the Imperius, of course, which I won’t cast on you. But there are other spells and potions who can force you to do things you don’t want to.”

His smirk mirrored her previous one. “I’d like to see that.”

“Later, later.” she smiled, patting his arm.

While he returned to his work, she reflected about him. Since they had been welcomed by the Dursleys and their friends, there had been a feeling of unease coming from Petunia. Alison had distinctively noticed Harry's mother looking sharply between Harry and her when she had given her name. Petunia being Harry's family, she hadn't dared inspecting her mind to discover what caused that.

Despite this, Harry and her had been friends quite quickly. His thirst for knowledge was intense and she was quite a good teacher. They had worked together, and joked together. To her, it felt as if he was now a little brother or close cousin. She suspected that every member of the large group felt a similar if not deeper connection with the boy. After all, it was he who federated everyone.

"Almost done." his voice interrupted her reverie, and she looked up. He was in front of her, looking behind her, and she turned around.

There was a lone tower there, without any door. She hadn't asked about it earlier, but the fact that he had waited so long to touch it was disturbing.

She couldn't prevent her question. "Harry, what is inside?"

For a long time, she thought he wouldn't answer, and his voice was almost too low to be heard.

"Nightmares." he said. "Pain. Death. My early childhood, I guess. I encased it to protect me from it, not to protect it from the outside."

She blanched. "What?"

"We'll do that later." he said uneasily. "We should rest, now. Besides, I just remembered that I could access my early childhood more easily than by inspecting bloody nightmares."

She didn't even scold him on his language. "What do you mean?"

He looked at her. "I'll ask mom."

They exited the now-desolated mind and took a short nap before dinner.

After the heartening meal, the kids left for their rooms, and Harry took his parents and Alison to an enlarged closet acting as a study. They all took a seat, the elder Dursleys looking between themselves.

“Mom, dad? I have a question.” Harry began.

“If it’s about how babies are made...” began Vernon, before stopping on his track. He had spent a long time entertaining colleagues and clients, and his adult jokes wouldn’t fare well with Harry. On top of that, Harry seemed serious and hadn’t even blushed. “Sorry,” he amended, “go ahead.”

“You both know I have a certain talent, which caused some problems in the past-”

“And which saved Petunia, for which I thank you again.” interrupted Vernon again.

Harry sighed, before resuming. “I have ordered my mind and can access all my memories except for my first year.”

Seeing their blank faces, Alison simplified. “He doesn’t remember his first year.”

“Who does?” asked Vernon, unaware that Petunia had paled dramatically.

“Well, I should be able to. All I know is that it’s linked to nightmares, and... bad events. I haven’t found the time or opportunity to ask you before, but I do now.” He looked at Petunia intently. “What happened?”

She paled even more, and began to shake.

“My love, what is it?” Vernon asked.

“Do I have to tell it?” she asked Harry, oblivious to Vernon’s attentions.

“No. I could take it from your mind. You have to actively think about it, though, for me to find it quickly.”

She swallowed hard, and nodded, closing her eyes. “I’m ready.” she said bravely, although in a trembling voice. “Remember I love you.” she whispered as Harry entered her mind.

He wasn’t surprised to find that it was a mess. Muggles weren’t able to sort their mind efficiently, and most wizards weren’t either. He copied the memory chunk hovering in front of him into his own mind and followed it to read it peacefully without disturbing his mother.

That’s when his world began to tilt.

He wasn’t Harry Dursley!

He was Harry Potter. Orphaned at the age of one because a madman had murdered his parents, James and Lily Potter. Adopted by the Dursleys, who thus weren’t his parents. Jamie wasn’t his computer-addicted brother. Eva and Maureen weren’t his adorable twin sisters. Who was he?

Who was Harry Potter?

In his mind, he felt someone touching his body and returned to real life. Alison was patting his back, offering a handkerchief while looking at him curiously. He was crying, and Petunia was, too.

Petunia, his aunt. And all this time, he had thought...

We start living by being what we are, young mortal, but that time is short as we continue by being what we do.

Wait a second. What’s that voice? He had heard it before. Deep, old, with a hint of hissing.

“Did you hear that?” he asked around.

Looking at everyone’s face, he understood that he had been the only one hearing it.

‘Great.’ he thought. ‘Now I’m hearing voices.’

He reflected about the voice’s message, and understood it. We are what we do, our actions shape the world. Petunia might not be his mother, but she sure acted like one. He finished exploring the memory slab and found out that Petunia intended to tell him everything before he’d leave for his magical school. In her mind, you’d receive a letter and then leave for school.

He hadn’t received a letter, though.

“Mum?” he said softly.

Petunia looked up, startled.

“I love you, mum.”

And they hugged.

After a bit, Vernon hugged them both, still not understanding what had happened.

A long pause ensued, after which they separated, Vernon helping Petunia to their room.

Alison looked at Harry inquiringly. “Can I ask what it was or is it private?”

“Since you asked anyways,” smirked Harry, “I’ll answer. I’ve been adopted. I’m not Harry Dursley. I’m Harry Po-” He stopped in his track, registering Alison’s last name. “Oh my god!”

“You’re Harry Pohomygod?” asked Alison with an amused sparkle in her eyes.

Harry swallowed, before correcting her. "I'm Harry Potter."

A pause.

A very long pause.

"What?" he asked. "Are we related?"

"You are Harry Potter." she said shakily, visibly asking confirmation.

"Yes."

"Son of James and Lily Potter-" she continued.

"Hey, wait a second, I didn't tell you that!"

She ignored the interruption, and went on. "-who were murdered on Halloween 1981 by the Dark Lord."

He looked at her with wide eyes. That was new for him.

"And when said Dark Lord turned on the baby to kill him, the curse rebounded and it disappeared, leaving Harry Potter alive and intact except for a..." she looked at his forehead and frowned. "lightning bolt shaped scar?"

Harry concentrated on the memory he got from Petunia again, and found out why. "I got muggle plastic surgery to get rid of that. Well, most of that, as I keep this as a result." He indicated the small round scar. "A scar of a scar, if you wish. It just gets red when I wake from a nightma-" He stopped suddenly.

Everything was becoming clearer! His nightmares, linked to his scar. The shroud around his early memories, a parting gift from said Dark Lord.

And just when he thought he had it, Alison added something which made his head spin. "And, since James and I were first cousins, that makes us first cousins, once removed."

The day had been eventful enough to consider going to bed a necessary operation at that point.

The following morning saw Josh and Alison explaining to Harry what they knew about his own story. Apparently, Voldemort's threat, despite being centred on Great Britain, had been heard by every witch and wizard, as well as his demise by the Boy-Who-Lived.

Each time they said this, Harry looked at them darkly. He really didn't want to be recognized, and sworn to practise changing his hair colour and length, just to be safe.

At some point during the day, Alison looked at him fixedly. "You haven't received a letter, have you?"

"No... I mean... recently? No."

Her face screwed up. "Strange."

"Why?"

"Because you're eleven, now. You should enter a magical school this year. And none wrote to you. Since you are, after all, Harry Potter, you should be accepted at Hogwarts."

"Why Hogwarts?"

"It is one of the oldest schools still having a regular flow of students. There are only two schools older than that and still accepting students although no more than a dozen carefully selected ones. One is in Tibet, and the other in Egypt."

"I remember, the redhead I saw there told me about a school in Gizeh."

“That’s the one. There are two schools following Hogwarts on the timeline. Durmstrang, in Northern Russia, and Beauxbatons, in France. There have been several openings for smaller schools around the world, but these are the most prestigious ones.”

“And you said I had to go to Hogwarts?”

“All British wizards are sent a letter inviting them to Hogwarts. Normally, muggleborns also receive the visit of one of the school teacher to introduce the family to the magical world.”

“Perhaps they lost track of me...” said Harry absently.

When he didn’t say more, she asked “Care to elaborate?”

“We went from England to America,” he started counting on his fingers, “then China, France, Germany, Turkey, Iraq, Egypt, Italy, Switzerland.” To her widened eyes, he smirked and added “and, for my part, I returned to America and back to Switzerland, before being hurled across the world, arriving in Samoa, where I met you again, then Mexico, where I...” he shook his head, and continued. “And back here.”

A pause ensued, while Alison looked at him appraisingly.

“Let’s finish hiding your mind. You’ll apply for Hogwarts from here.”

“Is it even possible?”

“I’m sure it is. I remember a couple of childhood friends leaving from America to Hogwarts when they reached the appropriate age.” She patted his head. “You’ll do fine.”

He nodded, before returning to his work, and that settled it.

Harry didn’t want to open the Pandora box that was his added tower, and began to dig a hole large enough for it. It took longer than they wanted, and Alison forced him to stop after a few hours.

In the study, they downed a vial of energizing potion between themselves – one of the advantages of being a registered wizard, Harry noted – and drank tea to wait for the potion to take effect. During the few minutes of rest, Alison grabbed Geneva's phone directory and they focused on finding an alternate identity.

"Harry Aslter?" asked Alison, browsing the heavy book.

"No."

"Harry Bertier?"

"No."

"Harry Cover?"

He looked at her, blinked, and then laughed. Hard.

"What?" she asked.

"I'm... I'm sorry." he gasped. "It's just that... in French... it means 'green peas'."

They couldn't find a proper name afterwards, focusing on amusing puns instead. When Josh poked his head to the door to inquire about their mirth, they had already written Harry Stocrat and Harry Thmetic, and were searching for other ideas in foreign languages. Two days afterwards...

After he and Alison had settled on his identity and appearance, they had sent a letter requesting that he could be transferred to Hogwarts. The Deputy Headmistress had answered, giving them an appointment for...

Someone banged at the door.

...right now.

Harry had only a few real friends. His closest muggle friend unrelated to the Dursleys was the German spy he had met in Berlin. The man, still answering to George Thomson, opened the door to see a man clad in black robes, pale skin, greasy black hair, and impenetrable onyx eyes.

“Severus Snape.” the man snapped, before entering the room promptly. Jorg immediately found the man disagreeable. If Harry hadn’t asked him to play the act, he’d have ousted the man at once. Harry, for his part, looking through a barely opened door, disliked the man as well, but he knew that appearances could be deceiving.

The man, after reaching the middle of the room, turned around swiftly his robes swivelling stylishly around him. “The Deputy Headmistress didn’t have time to show herself here.” he started. “That’s why I had to take the job.” In his mouth, "take the job" was sounding as if it was "lower myself to meet you pitiful self."

“I’m Hogwarts’ Potion Master and Professor. So, you think that your son is worthy enough to join Hogwarts?”

Jorg was too shocked by the man’s rudeness to answer, and he also didn’t notice the man’s hands working behind his back.

Harry though, had a good side view and noticed the wand being taken from a cleverly dissimulated holster. He decided to intervene earlier than scheduled and opened the door slowly. While keeping his whole attention on the man’s startled reaction and next actions, he stretched, yawning, and readjusted his pyjama when seeming to notice the man. His eyes, as brown as his supposed father’s, merely passed over the man, and he shook his head, his short curly hair moving wildly in the process. Severus Snape wouldn’t have recognized his old nemesis’ son. On top of his eyes and light brown hair, his skin and appearance had changed too. While his physical abilities were the same, he now looked smaller and a bit fleshier, and his skin was darker too.

“Morning, dad. Who is this?” he said, pointing his thumb at the haughty professor. After the man’s earlier impudence, he didn’t feel any remorse at hurting his pride.

Jorg’s eyes twinkled at the by-play. He knew that Harry could extract himself from dangerous situations, especially when people underestimated him. He patted his "son's" head with his valid hand, and scolded him lightly, while looking at the black-clad man. “You shouldn’t speak like this of strangers, son.”

Harry shrugged, before helping himself on cereals, continuing to speak as if the guest wasn’t there. “He woke me by yelling his name. It’s not a stranger, then, right?”

Jorg looked at Snape. The teacher seemed ready to explode, and he tried to defuse the situation.

“Right, son. Now, Mr Snap, I-”

“Professor Snape.” interrupted the man.

Jorg sighed. “Professor Snape, then. What do you want to know?”

“You don’t seem to be magical, and Hogwarts’ staff wanted to check if the boy was proficient enou-”

“ I’m here, you know.” interrupted Harry, speaking through a mouthful of cereals and milk.

“I’m not magical.” confirmed Jorg, once again watching the man intently. If he ever tried to threaten them, he was near enough for his close combat training to kick in, literally. “And I’m sure that, if you ask my son about anything, he’ll answer directly, to the best of his abilities.”

Severus Snape had seldom been kept off-balance by a mere child for so long, and he wanted revenge. Immediate, complete, and thorough revenge. He smirked, and Harry steeled himself internally.

“I’ll just cast a spell on him. It’s to see if he’s proficient.”

Jorg looked at Harry, who shrugged, seeming not to take any interest in their conversation.

In a fluid movement, the Potion teacher aimed his wand at Harry, and said “Legilimens.”

The boy’s mind was as expected. Average memories, average life, less-than-average magic potential, very few accidental magic events. It seemed that he had overheard a group of witches discussing about Hogwarts and decided to apply, as no other school had written him. Snape smirked internally. He had thought that the boy’s cheek was a sign of his power, and had wanted to crush him. Seeing the lowly mind, he thought that there was another way of exacting revenge. One interesting way. Oh yes, it will be sweet to teach the brat, reducing him to the state of nothingness whenever he wanted. He extracted himself from the mind, and nodded, his smirk still in place.

“I think you’ll have an interesting time in Hogwarts.”

And he directly Apparated out of the small apartment. Harry knew, from Alison’s explanations, that it was a highly impolite thing to do. He immediately lost his slouched stance and disappeared too. A few seconds afterwards, he reappeared and nodded at Jorg, smiling.

“He bought it?” asked the man.

“Oh yes he did. And he thinks that he’ll push me around.”

Jorg smiled. “You won’t go easy on him, will you?”

“Not a chance. He had been an insufferable git since even before seeing me.”

They both smiled, and Harry became thoughtful for a second, before smirking.

“What is it?” asked Jorg.

"I just remembered a sentence my Shaolin master once said. "May you live in interesting times." I think Snape's will definitely be, soon."

They laughed.

Geneva International Airport, morning of August 30th

The Dursleys, accompanied with Jorg, his mother Ulrike, Mustafa and Genevieve, had accompanied Harry, Alison and Josh to their plane. Several rounds of hugs occurred, Harry ending by being hugged by Vernon Dursley, his adoptive father.

"...and remember to be discreet, Harry." The man was saying. "You never know when somebody is watching."

"Actually, I do." muttered the teen.

"What was that?" asked Vernon.

"I just said I'll do." Harry said, smiling innocently.

"Good. Good."

"Are you prepared? Do you have everything?" asked Petunia for the twenty-third time and, for the twenty-third time, Harry's answer was: "Yes, mum."

He hadn't abandoned calling them mum and dad, to their pleasure. And his answer was true. He had received a list of school supplies the day after Snape's visit and he had gone through Anether Road with Josh to get them. Despite his protests, Alison and Josh had made it so that at least his first year of tuition was paid.

Harry had a regular truck, although charmed with a feather-light spell with an activation word, full with his school supplies. He also had a chain holding a locked, both invisible. The lock was, in fact, a diminished box the size of a suitcase. It was in that hidden space that he had stored his wands and the ring of Rowena Ravenclaw, as well

as other personal stuff he didn't want anyone peering at. His train ticket for Hogwarts, which he had received it a few days ago, was stored there as well.

He still had a last purchase to make, though, and it had to be done in London. The list of school supplies clearly specified that the wand to be used had to come from Ollivander's, the only wand maker in London. That's why he was leaving two days before the school opening, travelling with Josh and Alison.

Once they landed at Heathrow Josh took his leave. He had a connection on the next gate for Washington, as he had his teaching year to start soon. Alison and Harry called a cab and headed straight to the Leaky Cauldron, of which they had had the address from some of Alison's friends – the ones who had been in Hogwarts, precisely. Once there, Alison reserved rooms, and Harry, who had finished reading *Hogwarts: A History* on the flight, looked around impassively. The pub seemed... odd, but he reflected about his experience of wizarding pubs, or lack thereof, and he finally found himself looking at the people around him. Before he could analyse them, though, Alison grasped his shoulder and they exited towards and through the magical archway, heading to Diagon Alley.

They went to the owl shop and then the magical menagerie, but the student rush had passed already, and only pitiful samples of animals remained, some too ill to have been taken away. Despite Harry's spike of interest in front of a shop displaying a flying broom, they passed it without stopping. He knew the prices from Anether Road and didn't want to force Alison and Josh to pay for what was, in his eyes, a luxury.

After a quick look around, marvelling in front of the grand façade of Gringotts, and looking through the dark recess of Knockturn Alley, they went to Ollivander's to buy a wand. As Harry's magic was still wide open, the first wand he tried got him a positive result. Harry and Alison looked at each other, silently wondering if the old man in front of them had ever heard of Marig's way of finding a customer's wand. Harry filled the Ministry-approved form and took the wand, while Alison paid the required seven Galleons.

Once outside, Alison whispered “It reeked in there.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“I meant it didn’t smell good. Figuratively.”

“I know. I just wondered if you spoke about the old-fashioned way of finding one’s wand or the British Ministry holding tabs on everybody’s wand through the forms.”

She gasped.

He shrugged. “I felt a surge of magic when I signed with the wand. But it doesn’t really matters, as I have other ways if I don’t want to use it.” He winked, and she laughed.

“Still,” she said, “I’m sure that it was for this reason they sent you here. Every British student gets his wand here, and most keep them all their life. What better way is there to keep tabs on everyone?”

They fell silent for a while, before slowly walking away, towards the Leaky Cauldron. On the way, they passed next to Gringotts again, and Harry stopped.

“What?” asked Alison.

He stared at the bank for a moment, looking thoughtful.

“What?” she repeated.

“Do you know about the goblins’ allegiances?”

“In what regard? And why?”

He sighed, before looking at her. “You know I’m uncomfortable to let you pay for my tuition. You didn’t tell me how much it was, and I’ve the feeling you removed the memory from your mind the moment you paid, so as to forbid me to discover it.”

She blushed, but he ignored her.

“I wouldn’t have invaded your mind without your permission, though. Now that we are friends...”

She blushed even more.

“Nevertheless,” he went on, “I suspect it’s a hefty sum. Let me ask you a question or two: are the Potter a generally rich family? Were my parents rich enough to leave me with something?”

Her blush receded while she thought about it.

“I don’t know, really.” she said. “But the Potter family tree, in the wizarding world at the least, has ancestors back to the fifth century. Wizarding fortunes seldom diminish, and the farthest a line goes, the largest its financial means should be. By the way, that’s why I could pay for your school easily, while not working at the same time.”

It was his turn to blush, but he quickly recovered to ask his first question again. “So, do you know about the goblins’ allegiances? Do they obey to Ministry laws? Are they supervised by human wizards?”

“Again: why?”

He looked at her in the eye. “If my parents left me something, it’s probably in there. If I want to uncover it, I’ll have to introduce myself with my real name. I want to know if they can be trusted with that secret.” He smirked. “And if they can’t, do you know if their mind is easy to breach?”

She had started to open her mouth to answer his first question, but the last one left her gaping. “You don’t think...”

He shrugged. “I don’t need a wand to do that. Nobody could stop me. I’d only erase their memories of my real identity.”

She looked at him appraisingly, before shaking her head. “I don’t know about that. Nobody tried that stunt, lest they be barred from

using the bank again. Concerning your first question, I know that goblins are completely independent from wizarding laws. It has been signed in a charter after the last Goblin War with the wizarding world, centuries ago.”

He glanced at her inquiringly, and she shrugged. “Don’t ask me when, I never paid attention in History class. However, there is the possibility that a wizard is appointed as account manager, and he’ll be warned if you do anything on the account.”

He looked up sharply. “Being the account holder, I can still change that person, right?” he asked hopefully.

She nodded thoughtfully. “Of course. But I don’t know if, as a minor, you can actually do that.”

“And, what if-” he started, but she interrupted him.

“Rather than making assumptions, let’s head inside.” she said, dragging him forward. After a glance at the opening hours and days, she added “We’re quite lucky. It’s near their closing time, and they are closed on week ends. Whoever could be monitoring your account, they wouldn’t be warned before Monday.”

They entered the bank, where a lone teller was looking at the clock intently.

“We need to access an account, but the key has been lost. And we want to inspect the account’s properties beforehand.” Alison said in a business-like voice.

The goblin didn’t answer and merely gave her a parchment from one of the stacks in front of him. She started to read it, but the creature spoke for the first time. “The office is down this corridor,” he indicated an archway nearby, “third door to the left.”

They entered the small office, which door said "Knapsack, Account Management", where another goblin gestured them to two seats.

“What can I do for you?” he asked, a fake smile plastered on his face.

Alison spoke first. “I am to be appointed as my cousin’s account supervisor, removing whoever is holding that spot as discreetly as possible.” she nodded to where Harry was seated.

“And you are?” asked the goblin.

“Alison Potter. My cousin is Harry Potter.” the goblin lost his smile and looked at Harry with wide eyes.

Harry, in turn, looked at Alison worriedly. How comes she was so straightforward? The goblin could very well refuse and warn whoever he wanted...

She knew what she was doing, though, having learnt from her family how to deal with goblins.

“You’ll understand we request the highest confidentiality on this. This could be classified as...” she looked at the goblin, seeming thoughtful. “As a Dragon-level contract? What do you say, Knapsack?”

The goblin looked at her with wide eyes, before his smile returned to his parched lips. It was a real smile, though, greedy teeth showing and all.

“Agreed.” he stood on his desk, hand forward.

Alison looked at Harry with a smug smile, before turning toward the goblin again.

“Even if Harry doesn’t have his keys?” she asked.

The goblin seemed to think. For half a second. And he nodded.

“Excellent.” Alison said, before shaking his hand.

The goblin then seemed to transform into a whirlwind of activity, as pre-filled form after pre-filled form appeared in front of them.

“You need to sign this, both of you.” the goblin said, giving them a silvery... knife?

Harry looked at the blade, wondering, but Alison nodded and, taking the knife, she pierced her left thumb, and let a drop of blood fall on the parchment. She then gave the knife to Harry and healed herself. Harry looked at the contract, but he couldn't understand it. And, given the stack under that one, he would need a whole month to comprehend everything. Alison prodded him, and he proceeded in piercing his left thumb, letting a drop of blood fall on the appropriate rectangle.

The signature was copied on each and every form underneath the first, and, under Harry's surprised gaze, his full name appeared in the appropriate boxes, as well as Alison's. Goblin magic, he reflected.

He gave the knife back to Knapsack and watched as the goblin looked at the forms, nodding, before removing the third form from the stack.

“This one is about getting your keys. As the family vault doesn't need a key, and as you can't enter it yet – you need to be of age – there is only your trust vault to consider. You have several options for it. You can get a copy of the official key which is at the moment detained by,” he looked at the form, “one Albus Dumbledore.” The goblin ignored the gasp from Alison and continued. “You can also request that this official key be transferred to you. Or you can also create a new official key, invalidating the previous one.”

Alison was still gaping, and Harry looked at the goblin, speaking for the first time. “Family vault, sir?”

Knapsack smiled. “Yes. There is a vault in the deeper sections, useable by the Potters.”

“Why don't we need a key?”

“Because any Potter by blood, name, and of-age would only have to push the door to enter the real vault. Anyone else will find an empty space. It’s a security measure that had been asked for by old Melachias, your great-great-great-great-grandfather.”

“What’s inside, please, and what is the trust vault?”

“We don’t know what’s inside family vaults, only what goes in and out through our automated processes. Almost nothing had gone out in the last 10 years or so. What has gone in was profits from business shares the Potter hold around the world. And, generally, a family vault contains family heirlooms and, while they are not used, the family’s Heir ring.” The goblin took a swig from a small flask, before continuing. “Your trust vault has been established by late James and Lily Potter for your use, but they specified it should be used primarily to pay for your education. A year at Hogwarts costs 1000 Galleons, and the vault now holds 10000 Galleons – roughly equivalent to 50000 Sterling pounds.”

It was Harry’s turn to gasp.

In the meantime, Alison had recovered, and answered to the goblin’s earlier question. “We don’t want anyone to suspect the trust vault has been touched. I think we’ll only transfer its content to a new one. Do you agree, Harry? Harry?”

The teen was still lost. “50000 pounds.” he whispered.

“Quite a sum.” said the Goblin, eyes shining.

Harry shook himself. “Alright. Let’s do that. New vault and such. Let that... what was his name again? Ablue Doubledoor? Let him have control over an empty vault. He won’t know where the money will be transferred, right?”

The two others were looking at him with wide eyes, before laughing heartily. It was a strange sight to behold, as a goblin never laughed. Well, never in public anyway. Alison stopped her giggle to look at the

creature in wonder, and said creature self-consciously stopped his chortle.

“What?” Harry asked.

“It’s Albus Dumbledore.” Knapsack told him.

“And he’s the most powerful wizard alive, especially since you brought an end to Voldemort’s reign of terror.” stated Alison.

“He’s also the Headmaster of Hogwarts.” Knapsack informed him.

Harry paled a bit. “You mean to say... the wizard holding my account... is the most powerful wizard in the world... and manages the school I’ll go to?”

Their nods made him stutter for a second. “I... But... How can I fool him? I mean...”

“Harry...” said Alison gently.

“It’s not like I can hide anything if he’s that powerful, and...” he rambled, looking at the floor.

“Harry.” she insisted.

“And what if he finds out? I’ll be expelled, and-”

“Harry!” she snapped her fingers at his face.

Her interruption seemed to wake him up, and he jerked upright. “What?”

“You were lost in thoughts, there.”

He looked at her owlishly, and blinked, twice, before recovering his usual spirit. “I shouldn’t be. Thoughts aren’t unknown territory for me, you know.”

“Exactly. Get a grip, now.” she said coldly, but her tone was denied by her amused eyes.

They turned to look at the goblin, who was looking at the clock. Understanding that they had a short time to finish, they sped up and got out of the bank no more than five minutes later, one hundred Galleons poorer because of the Dragon-level confidentiality asked by Alison. Harry, though, was a hundred Galleons heavier, because Alison had advised him to get some "pocket money".

The next day was Saturday, and they spent it resting and enjoying a bit of muggle London's sights. The following morning, they found themselves at King's Cross train station, searching for platform nine and three quarters. Not having been at Hogwarts before, neither Harry nor Alison knew how to reach the platform itself. The hour was nearing and, as they still didn't find it, Harry fell back to his own method of getting information. He sat at the entrance of platform 9 and 10, and carefully expanded his senses to discover if wizards and witches were around. Once he found one, a bulky man with a feeble aura and no mind defences whatsoever, he quickly extracted the location of the platform from his immediate memories.

“Wait!” called Alison as Harry was standing up, ready to leave toward the magical gate.

“What?”

“You're hidden pretty well, now.” she whispered. “But I'm not. If you don't want to be recognized, it wouldn't fare well for you to be seen with a Potter.”

“You think that people would recognize you?”

“Let's not take risks, okay?”

“Alright.”

They stayed in front of each other, unsure of what to do.

“Well, it’s time.” said Alison, breaking their relative silence – after all, how silent can a train station get?

“Yes.” Harry gulped. “I’ll see you for Christmas.”

“Okay. You, remember to be discreet about... about everything.”

He rolled his eyes. “I’ll do, sis.”

“What did you call me?”

He blushed. “Sis. You are like a big sister to me. Of course, if you don-”

She interrupted him by taking a step forward and giving him a bear hug, which he tried to return. When they separated, both had shining eyes.

“Shoo, now, little brother. You don’t want to miss that train.” she said, and smiled sadly when he bolted toward the gate.

To be continued in next chapter: Hogwarts’ Staff and Staves...

Why do chapters get so long?
How will he be in the throng?
You know events already,
Let’s just hope he’ll be ready.

PART 2 – Learning to Fight... Hidden

This part comprises chapters 10 to 17 and covers Harry's first year at Hogwarts.

Chapter 10 – Hogwarts' Staff and Staves

posted August 11th, 2005

After activating the feather-light charm with the appropriate command word, Harold Thomson hauled his trunk in the train and pulled it behind him as he searched for a free seat. The train was leaving in five minutes, and the first cars were crammed. After passing another full compartment, he heard frightened squeals coming from it, and three students rushed out. Guessing that the place was less full now, he approached.

A black student with dreadlocks, looking older than him by a year or two, glanced his way with an inviting smile. "Morning. You're here to see the tarantula?"

Harold smiled. "Well... actually, I'm searching for a place to sit, but why not? Are those seats taken?"

The other seemed to think for a second. "I'm waiting for a few friends, but I think we can all squeeze in. Here, let me help."

"No need-" started Harold, but his trunk had already been grasped by the eager student, who, surprised by its weightlessness, dropped it in surprise.

"As I was telling you," said Harold, easily hoisting the luggage on the overhead compartment, "no need, thanks."

"Wicked." A pause. "I'm Lee Jordan." said the black student, his hand forward.

"Harold Thomson." answered Harold, shaking the proffered hand. "Now, what is the tarantula about?"

“It’s a large and hairy one. Three Knuts to see it, and five if you want to pat it. It’s highly venomous, though. If you dare to take it in your hands, you get all the Knuts I received before.”

“Has anyone taken it yet?” asked Harold, half-tempted to take the bet.

Lee smirked. “Nope. And I open the box after receiving the payment. Ah!” he exclaimed, looking outside.

Harold looked in that direction, and found nothing really unusual. Except that a tribe of redheads had entered the platform. A fiery red, which immediately reminded him of someone else. Someone called Bill. Three of them immediately took a run towards the last wagon, while the older-looking teen merely huffed and went for the first.

“What?” he asked.

“Here are two of my friends: Fred and George.” Lee looked at Harold. “The twins.” he elaborated.

“Alright.” answered Harold, looking around the platform in case he’d see an interesting thing or two. And he found one.

A blond one. Looking in his general direction. Memories of a fight...

He sat down quickly, his breathing a tad heavier than normal.

“What is it?” asked Lee.

Harold blinked, before returning to his normal self. “Nothing. So, about the tarantula?” He transferred the three Knuts from his purse to the older student, and the few minutes afterwards were spent in discussion about magical beasts and then about the school. More a one-sided explanation from Lee, really, because Harold confirmed being a first year.

In the middle of Lee's humorous – although honest – description of teachers and courses, the two similar redheads entered the cabin and sat, panting slightly.

“Wow, Lee!” said the first. “We knew that Ron didn't like spiders-”

“-but it's even worse, isn't it, Fred?” continued his identical brother.

“Indubitably, George.” Fred answered. “We left poor Ickle Ronniekins with our trunks-”

“-and I'm sure he won't move a muscle-”

“-until we arrive.” they finished together, before taking a few breath to calm themselves.

After a couple seconds, George added “And Ginny was in a right state, too.”

“Why?” asked Lee.

“Well,” Fred answered, “she has made her calculations and she thinks that her Harry will be on board.”

“Of course, due to Ron's tardiness, she couldn't browse the crowd for her hero.” George stated.

“Therefore, she was in a right state.” Fred nodded, confirming his brother's words.

“And she even suspected us of having kept Ron up yesterday.”

“Us!”

“As if we'd do anything like that!”

“Like... informing him about the horrendous tests needed for the Sorting.”

“Exactly! We’d never do that!”

“She’s mental.” they finished together again.

Despite being funny as they held themselves as innocence personified, the twin’s banter was as tiring as watching a match of tennis, and Harold turned his head to see London suburbs as the train passed them, tuning the twins out. However, two words caught his attention mere seconds afterwards.

“...Harry Potter.”

He turned abruptly. “What?”

“What what?” answered one of the twins.

“Why what what?” said his brother, an amused glint in his eyes. He looked at Lee who understood.

“Who why what what?” he said.

“When who why what what?” repeated the first twin.

Harold closed his eyes and sighed. It was probably a game of theirs. Despite being half a second away from flipping their mind, he wouldn’t. ‘No use of abilities.’ he scolded himself. He had to be patient, though, as the rolling game was already counting a dozen words. He smirked.

“What who why where whom when why where whose when who why what what?” he said.

A silence.

A cheer.

“At last! We have a player!” said a twin.

“We have a winner!” said his twin.

“Nobody played their games before.” Lee informed Harold.

“I’m George Weasley.” said the first twin, his mouth twitching at the corners.

“I’m Fred Weasley.” said the other, with the same facial tic.

Harold didn’t even have to parse their mind to know that they had switched forenames.

“And here is our dear friend Lee Jordan.” said the one who had called himself George.

“I know.” said Harold. “I’m Harold Thomson.”

“You know?” said the real George.

“He saw the tarantula already.” stated Lee.

That raised another discussion about magical beasts, Fred and George informing them that they wanted to catch an acromantula to put in Ron’s dormitory, just for the fun of it. After asking – and getting – information about what an acromantula was, Harold decided that the twins were indeed dangerous persons to live by. He had lived dangerously all his life, though, and wasn’t against little hazards to keep him on edge, especially funny ones.

They bought a handful of candies as the woman selling them passed by the compartment, and a moment of calmness ensued, which Harold used to utter the question he had wanted to ask earlier.

“What were you saying about Harry Potter? And who is he, by the way?”

“You mean you don’t know about Harry Potter?” asked Fred.

"'he 'oy-Who-'ive'?" asked George, his mouth full.

Lee rolled his eyes. "The one stuffing himself wanted to say "The Boy-Who-Lived," I think." Seeing George's dark gaze, he back-pedalled. "Now, I could be wrong. It could have been "'he 'oy-Who-'ive'," for all I know."

George had swallowed at that point, and had recovered his usual cheerfulness. "Exactly! That's precisely what I wanted to say!"

"Glad to have been of service." Lee curtsied.

"To answer your questions, know that Harry Potter is a hero in the wizarding world-" Fred said.

"-because he brought an end to the Dark Lord's reign of terror." George added, starting the tennis-match-like exchange again.

"But he's a mysterious hero, as nobody ever saw him."

"Our mother used to tell stories about him to bring our sister to sleep-"

"-and she now has a crush on the poor boy."

"She really made calculations, you know-"

"-and she found he should be entering Hogwarts this year."

"She's been in a right state all morning."

Harold tried to interrupt the match. "So, you have one sister, Ginny, and one brother, Ron?"

"Actually, her forename is Ginevra, but she'll get revenge if you call her that." said Fred, wincing.

"And we don't have only one brother-"

“-thankfully-”

“-we have Ronald, sure-”

“-only thinks of Quidditch, and to feed himself-”

“-we also have Percy-”

“-who is prefect for Gryffindor.”

“The disgrace!” said the two jokers at the same time, shaking their head in mock chagrin.

“And before him, we have Charlie-”

“-who is now working in a dragon reserve in Romania.”

“And even before, Bill.”

“He’s curse breaker for Gringotts, and works in Egypt at the moment.”

“You didn’t know about Harry Potter?” asked Lee, effectively interrupting the banter.

“Huh?” asked Harold, a bit stunned by the sheer amount of information and the subsequent realizations.

When Lee repeated his question, he shrugged. “Sorry. Muggleborn, here.”

A pause.

“If you are a muggleborn, how comes your trunk is charmed?” asked Lee.

It took half a second for Harold to come up with a proper answer to that. After all, honesty was a good weapon sometimes. "I come from Switzerland, and bought my trunk in Anether Road, the equivalent of Diagon Alley. I asked if there were any options, and when the shopkeeper acquiesced, I asked for an explanation about each. I got it charmed with feather-light only, but I think I'll get it enlarged next year. The required supplies are quite numerous. And heavy."

He smiled at their stunned look and shrugged. "What? It's what we call "practical intelligence." Are wizards devoid of it?"

That started another bout of good-natured tongue lashing between the pureblood Weasleys and the supposed muggleborns, only interrupted by the entrance of three girls.

"Ah, our chasers have caught the train!" said Fred.

"And what if we didn't?" asked one of the girls, a tall black one with long hair held up in a ponytail.

"Besides," continued another one, a seemingly younger one, "Oliver has just said it would be the three of us, it's not a definite move of his part."

"Come on," interrupted George, "once he has decided something, it's bound to stay, you know that."

"And if you hadn't caught the train," said Lee, looking at Angelina intently, "I'd have kidnapped the train driver and turned the train around."

"You and your mouth!" the black girl answered, but an amused twinkle had appeared in her eyes.

Sensing that the six of them surely had summer stories to tell, and as there wasn't much space in the compartment anyway, Harold stood to leave. The twins stopped him and made the necessary introductions before allowing him to leave. He shook hands with Angelina Johnson, Alicia Spinnet, and Katie Bell.

Harold walked idly the length of the train, watching the magical teens interact. From what he remembered from *Hogwarts: A History*, there were four Houses where students got sorted following certain traits of character. Bravery tended to put you in Gryffindor, loyalty was Hufflepuff's specialty, Ravenclaws were known for their intelligence, and Slytherins were supposed to be cunning. There were points given and taken to a student's house following that student's studies and behaviour, and, at the end of the year, the House Cup was given to the house having the most points.

That paragraph had made him snort. How could the House Cup be given in a fair way when all the brains were in one House? When he had read about the importance of Quidditch points in the House Cup run, he had understood better, but it still didn't make sense. Bravery and cunning could be attitudes to get points through sports, but loyalty wasn't. And the school records listed in the book had proved that: in the thousand-or-so years of exercise, the Hufflepuff house had gained the House Cup only 27 times. And grouping the students by character traits would surely bring prejudice between houses. He decided that he would do his best to change things.

His musings were interrupted by an altercation going on in a compartment. By the sound of the voices, a girl was telling a boy off. Two gorillas were waiting at the door, and Harold recognized one of them as he had taken the platform gate's location from his thick father's mind. His first reaction had been to go there to make friends, but they growled in a menacing way when he advanced, and he revised his judgement. He didn't let their intimidation technique work, though, and looked in the compartment.

There was the blond boy again. He couldn't remember his name well, but he clearly remembered being cheated in what should have been a fair fight.

"...and when little mudbloods like you come to Hogwarts, it's the disgrace of the whole wizarding world. Magical education should be reserved to purebloods." the blond was saying. "You shouldn't be allowed in here, and I'll make sure that my father knows about it. He's on the Board of Governors, you know, and-"

Harold had heard enough. Bullies were the same everywhere. As the same girl was telling the blond boy that it was only his opinion, Harold tried to enter the compartment, only to find his way blocked by two strong hands on his chest. He looked at the hands amusedly, then at their owners.

A mere second later...

“Excuse me?”

The blond swivelled around, drawing his wand in what should have been a graceful and obviously rehearsed gesture. But the wand fell short and clanked on the floor. Its owner fumbled after it, blushing furiously, before standing again.

“What is it?” he drawled, before taking the scene into account.

A young boy, seemingly his own age, was clutching one finger from each of his bodyguards in each of his hands, and they were kneeling beside him, in obvious pain.

“For a pureblood, you sure have a remarkable way of drawing your wand.” Harold said, before putting a bit of pressure on the gorillas’ bent fingers, eliciting yelps from them. “And your bodyguards are quite delicate, too. They could benefit from lessons of fighting the muggle way...”

The blond boy whose name he finally remembered – after all, his mind wasn’t so badly ordered, was it? – seemed ready to explode at that comment, but Harold’s two next words changed that.

“...like you.”

Draco Malfoy reeled backwards, gaping wordlessly and paling dramatically. After a full minute of silence, Harold gave a final squeeze to the brutes’ fingers, took the blond by the shoulder and shoved him outside.

He then turned toward the still-standing girl, who looked at him questioningly.

“I guess I have to thank you,” she said, “but you shouldn’t be fighting in school. He would have gotten what he deserves sooner or later.”

Of all the reactions she could have had, he had never thought of that, and he fumbled for an answer.

“Well... err... nice to meet you too?” That bought him some time, and he thought about what she said before continuing. “If it’s the same to you, I prefer when bullies get what they deserve sooner instead of later. And right now seemed to be a good idea. We aren’t even on school grounds yet. Even Hogsmeade isn’t on Hogwarts grounds, which is why *Hogwarts: A History* lists so many student fights and illegal duels happening there.”

It took a moment for her to process all this, but when done, she looked at him with bright eyes. “You have read *Hogwarts: A History*?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I? As a muggleborn, there are many things I didn’t know about the school.”

“I’m a muggleborn too, but my parents didn’t want me to be buy magical stuff until late August.” said a boy with curly brown hair and equally brown eyes. “Justin Finch-Fletchley.” he said, extending his hand.

Harold shook it, before turning back to the bushy-haired girl who had sit down in meantime. She looked more amenable, and he sighed. “Let’s start again. I’m Harold Thomson, muggleborn. Nice to meet you all.”

“Hermione Granger. Muggleborn, too. Nice to meet you too.”

“I’m a half-blood.” said another boy, with sandy hair and an undeniable Irish accent. “My mother is a witch, and didn’t tell my

muggle father until they were married. Quite a nasty shock." He smiled and shook Harold's hand. "Seamus Finnigan."

"I'm muggleborn, but I don't want that fact to prevent me from studying." said a serious-looking girl at the window. "I'm Tracey Davis."

"I'm Neville Longbottom, pureblood." said a shy-looking boy in a corner, patting a toad. "But when I see people like that one, I'm ashamed of it."

"You don't have to, you know." answered Harold. "One of my friends once said that opinions were like assholes: everyone had one but some smelled worse than others."

They laughed, and that was the start of a conversation which didn't stop before nearing Hogsmeade station, when an announcement reminded the students to change into their school uniforms. Harold returned to Lee's compartment to change, idly reflecting about Malfoy and his goons' absence on the remainder of the trip.

As the train stopped, he steeled himself and smiled. Harry Potter was going to Hogwarts, and he seriously hoped not to be recognized. The giant man who welcomed the first year seemed sympathetic enough to Harold, despite his massive bulk. It was late at night already, and several students were tired already. However, the pitch black lake they crossed and the imposing and magnificent stone castle truly were sights to behold, keeping the little first years a bit more awake.

Once inside the majestic dining room, Harold looked around. So that was the Great Hall and Sorting Ceremony? All students were there and, once a student got sorted in a house, that house applauded or cheered. He immediately noticed that Lee, Fred, George, Alicia, Angelina, and Katie were in Gryffindor.

After a while, he noticed that the sorting Hat wasn't taking the same time to sort students. Some, like Malfoy, got sorted the moment they

put it on, and the boy made a beeline towards the Slytherins who welcomed him like a prince. Others, like Hermione or Seamus, needed a longer time to be sorted, and the used piece of garment seemed to actually ponder things before deciding. Hermione landed in Ravenclaw and Seamus in Gryffindor. Of their train compartment, there also were Neville, who was surprised to get into Gryffindor; Tracey Davis, who looked disgusted at being sorted in the same house as Malfoy; and Justin Finch-Fletchley who was unsurprised when he sat with the Hufflepuff.

And then, it was his turn. He went to the stool, catching the black-clad Potion Master's gaze, and sat down, before putting the overly large hat on.

He immediately heard a voice in his fake mind. "What is this? What in the hell is this? I've never seen a mind in such a bad shape. You'll have to ask lessons on how to organize one's mind, young man. I don't even find your qualities in there! I need them to sort you, you know? I'm sorry, but I can't choose. You are a wizard, though, and you should be sorted. But I refuse to take that responsibility. Let the staff VOTE!"

Harold didn't even have time to argue, as the last word was yelled in the same way as the other students' house name, and a commotion ensued. Hermione was looking left and right at her table, assuring that it had happened already – a dozen times in the thousand-odd years the school had been running. The staff members looked unsure of what to do for a moment until Albus Dumbledore stood to run the vote.

"Let's vote then, if Alastair can't decide. For Slytherin?"

Unless they knew the person, each Head of House had to vote for his or her own house. Besides, each of them secretly wanted more students. Severus Snape, however, was gleeful – something which, on his person, only showed by the slightly upturned mouth corners – as he didn't raise his hand. Focused on the insolent boy, he even missed the alarmed gaze his godson Draco threw his way.

“Very well, then.” said Dumbledore after a pause. “For Ravenclaw?”

Flitwick raised his hand, while still looking at Snape inquiringly. After all, they all knew that Snape had interviewed the boy. Why wouldn't he want him in his own house? Unless...

His musings came to an abrupt halt when Trelawney raised her hand too, and the diminutive teacher refrained from slapping her. With her usual accuracy in petty predictions, the boy wouldn't go Ravenclaw, that was sure.

“For Hufflepuff?”

Sprout raised her hand, and Hagrid surprised several teachers by following suit.

“For Gryffindor?”

McGonagall raised her hand. And, to the surprise of everyone who knew him, Snape did, too. The vote was done and accounted for, though, and no recourse could be filed.

“Well,” said the Headmaster, “it just seems that the votes are tied, so, as our tradition states, our new student has a vote. What do you choose?”

Harold looked around. Everybody was looking at him. He didn't want that. He wanted to hide, not to look overly brave or studious. The word escaped his mouth without even thinking about it.

“Hufflepuff.”

Harold Thomson sat at the Hufflepuff table, between Justin and a newly sorted girl named Susan Bones, under a somewhat stunned and delayed applause.

The next day started with the Heads of House giving out the courses planning. Most of the courses were arduous, especially for the students raised as muggles. Not only arduous, but jam-packed with information, homework, and they were sometimes dangerous. Not

wanting to raise unnecessary suspicion, and not that sure that he could get away with it, Harold refrained from obtaining answers from the teachers' mind and focused on the courses the normal way.

The first courses were mostly introductory lessons, and went well for everyone. Until the Potion lesson, that is.

After calling the roll, sneering when he uttered Harold's name, the Potion Master spoke a global introduction to his subject, which could have been frightening if Harold hadn't perceived that it was rehearsed. Several students paled and Hannah Abbot even got her teeth chattering. The pink-faced Hufflepuff girl with her hair in pigtails wasn't helped by the generally dank atmosphere of the dungeons. Afterwards, Snape grilled several of them with questions – as if 11-years old students were supposed to learn the whole textbook before the year! When it was Harold's turn to be interrogated, the boy kept silent, looking at his teacher with wide eyes. That cost him some points, but he wasn't the only person to do so in that particular classroom. For Snape, it confirmed his lack of abilities.

The Potion Master then paired them before demanding that they brew a lotion to heal boils, only displaying the recipe on the board. Then, instead of answering questions or giving explanations and advices, the man continually belittled their work. He ignored the raised hands, and kept passing through the benches, silently approaching students from behind, and speaking up at the worst moments, thus disturbing even the most focused students. After two hours of constant bickering, Snape's haughty demeanour became a little more disturbing when he began to twitch at random times, as if itching or batting a fly away. It disturbed the students even more, and few of them succeeded in brewing the lotion correctly.

Harold had said nothing during the whole period. Susan Bones was another Hufflepuff girl, this one wearing her hair in a long plait down her back, and he had been paired with her. Because his apathy, she had had to brew the potion mostly by herself, succeeding in obtaining just the proper ointment even if Snape only scowled at the result. When the double period ended, she grasped her things, and walked away stiffly, heading toward their House cellar, and leaving Harold to bottle the lotion.

Harold hadn't really cared about the Potion lesson because, during the whole three-hour period, he had prodded around his teacher's mind, and he was now sure he could do something about the man. He would have to be careful, of course, because the man's mind was like a bunker, and he suspected that it was heavily defended, too. Harold thought that the best time to actually do something to get his revenge would be by night, because the man's mind should be less protected. In scheduling his revenge, he also chose to use only the eve of course-free mornings, which left only Saturdays and Wednesdays. Their Thursdays mornings were free because of the Astronomy course, which was scheduled at midnight, every Wednesday.

He began to explore the castle, first by discreetly following the Potion Master a couple of times after dinner. He wanted to learn about the man's quarters, and found them – unsurprisingly – in the dungeons. He didn't try anything more adventurous, though, because he constantly felt observed, again, like in China and in France, and even more so when he was out of Hufflepuff cellar after curfew. He tried to shake the feeling, but it always accompanied him, even when he was in a closed room. He tried unused classrooms, tower tops, bathrooms, but the faint feeling didn't go away. The only moments he felt freer, although by a tad bit, was when out of the castle proper for the Herbology period.

On Thursday evening, his homework finished, Harold decided to read *Hogwarts: A History* again, to check if there was anything said about student surveillance, and found something interesting in the chapter about the school staff: "...and the Headmaster has all power and knowledge on the school. Since Albus Dumbledore's tenure, it has even been proven time and again. The reasons behind this are not know, but we can suppose that the Headmaster has the castle under a spell of some sort, even if it would be very taxing for his health to keep it going all the time. However, no such spell is known to exist, and other ideas have been researched. Some suspect that the castle itself is alive. After all, after receiving so much magic during its creation (see chapter 1- Building) and in the subsequent thousand years of hosting magical children, this idea could very well be proven true. At the date these lines were written, our fine squad of

investigators had been refused the right to explore the fabled castle's lowest dungeons (where an ancient dragon is rumoured to be sleeping – see chapter 1, again). Now, the Defence Against the Dark Arts position, held by..."

Harold looked at his watch and, noticing the advanced hour, put the heavy volume back in his trunk, before cancelling his Light spell and going to sleep.

Despite being sorted in different Houses, Harold and the five others from the train compartment tried to find time to discuss together. And Hermione being there, they eventually discussed homework and studies, too. As access to the common rooms was restricted, they often found themselves either in the Library or out on the grounds. In the first years' schedule, the whole Friday afternoon had been freed, and the first time the study group met that day, on the lake shore, they had already several interesting stories to tell, the prominent one being Neville's.

That very morning, the first years got their first accident of the year, during Snape's three-hour course with the Gryffindors and Slytherins. Neville had unknowingly switched lines while copying the recipe and succeeded in melting Seamus' cauldron after only half an hour of class. The boy hadn't thought that adding the porcupine quills without taking the cauldron out of the fire first would be dangerous, and Snape had been of no help either. Not only the man wasn't telling them the ingredients' properties, but he was also keeping silent the how and why about mixing and stirring. Neville's melt cauldron resulted in damaged furniture and shoes, an irate teacher, loss of house points, Neville obtaining angry red boils on his person, and a one-way trip to the infirmary with the help of Seamus.

That weekend, Harold decided to explore the castle again, but found nothing particularly interesting. No ancient dragon. No hidden treasure. But the feeling of being observed was still at the back of his mind, and he returned to Hufflepuff cellar exhausted and empty-handed. Having spent all his Saturday in empty dank corridors, he decided to spend the next day resting and doing his homework.

Susan, who had been cold to him for two days because his lack of help in Potions, was also doing her homework alone in the common room also, and he decided to do something about it. He went to her just as she was finishing her Transfiguration assignment, and apologized. The two of them started to discuss about teachers, and she eventually conceded that if Sprout was as "fair" as Snape was, she would give points to Hufflepuff, by the hundreds. The two of them resumed their budding friendship. Like Hermione, she had an ingrained respect for authority, thought, and only grudgingly admitted Snape's unfairness.

The next week, the students spoke of only one thing: Quidditch. The first years had their first flying lessons scheduled on Thursday and tryouts had been scheduled over the week's evenings.

Once Thursday came, the fifty-or-so first years went in the castle inner bailey accompanied by Madam Pomfrey, the school nurse. On the way, some students paled when others told them jokes about mortal accidents happening in the previous years. Once they rejoined Madam Hooch, flying instructor and Quidditch referee, everybody noticed the circle of brooms around the stern woman.

"Okay everybody. I want you to listen, and listen well. Any mishap here could cause broken arms or worse, so pay attention." the flying instructor had everyone's attention at that point.

"On the ground are disposed 24 brooms, which belong to the school. They are working perfectly, even if some of you have better brooms at home. You perhaps wondered why you weren't allowed to bring them here? The answer is simple: you are not going to play Quidditch, so there is no need for you to bring it."

"Professor?" asked Hermione, whose hand had shot in the air so fast that Ron Weasley, who was beside her, was almost knocked by it. The redhead muttered a string of words ending with "... mental, that one." and unsuccessfully bargained with his other neighbour, a tall black boy going by the name Dean Thomas, to switch places.

"Yes. You are?" Rolanda Hooch's voice resounded in the courtyard.

“Hermione Granger, professor. I read, in *Hogwarts: A History*,” at that, some of her House mates groaned aloud, but she continued undeterred, “that there have been players taken in the first years, the last of whom dates back a century.”

Madam Hooch stayed silent for a moment, and the students began to talk between themselves. Hermione had just made a few friends in a few words, as many students looked eager to fly, now.

“Quiet!” shouted their teacher, before speaking in a normal voice again. “Unfortunately, I wasn’t around to check about the conditions of their recruitment, a century ago. You should ask the Headmaster, though. He was.”

Several students laughed silently at the joke while others groaned about the failed opportunity.

“Now, now, now. As you can see, there are not enough brooms for all of you. Slytherin and Ravenclaw, you go first. Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, you go with Madam Pomfrey, who will brief you with flying accidents and basic healings methods used to heal them. We’ll switch in a hour.” she brought a whistle to her lips and blew a shrill note which got everyone moving and in place in less than a minute.

While the others were learning how to fly, the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs learnt that there were several kinds of flying accidents and other mishaps. The nurse wasn’t really into the brooms, but she told them about the bruised muscles, broken bones, and cracked skulls, that she had had to heal during the years.

As he knew about broken bones, and as he had his own healing methods, Harold tuned her down, absentmindedly looking at the other houses practising their broom flight, or, in one particular case, showing off. Draco Malfoy was prancing on his broom, mocking the Ravenclaws’ attempts, particularly Hermione’s broom which hadn’t moved from the ground. It visibly didn’t disturb him that half his House was barely doing better, and in some cases, even worse: at the end

of the lesson, his two bodyguards had yet to lift their brooms from the ground.

After the required hour, the houses switched places. From the corner of his eyes, Harold saw that Malfoy was completely ignoring the nurse's speech, discussing animatedly with his goons while showing them something and pointing in their general direction.

He was abruptly distracted from his thoughts by a face appearing right in front of his. Madam Hooch wasn't quite happy. "You, what's your name and what did I just say?"

Harold looked around in shame and saw that his fellow students were doing... something with their brooms. Or trying to. Susan was looking at him and motioning something but he didn't understand. "Harold Thomson, Madam. I'm sorry, I got distracted."

Honesty was something this teacher appreciated, and she nodded curtly. "I said that you had to stand beside the broom, extend the hand on top of it, and say "Up," and next time, I will remove points."

"Yes, Ma'am." he said meekly. "Thank you, Ma'am."

Her lips twitched, but she turned around before he could see her smile, and she went to Ron Weasley, who had succeeded in getting his broom in hand on the first try, and was now mounting it. Harold looked down and frowned, concentrating.

"Up!" he commanded.

And the broom obeyed, shooting upwards. Harold hadn't thought that it would go that fast and failed to catch it. In fact, he had thought that it was his job to levitate the broom, and had added his own power to the broom's, resulting in the piece of charmed wood levitating 10 feet from the ground. He knew he could get it from that height, and he crouched, ready to jump for it, before remembering where he was. Looking around, he noticed that Hooch was looking at him and he straightened up, before shrugging in a "what can I do?" gesture.

She didn't have time to fetch it, though, as a student had just lost control of his broom. Visibly, Neville was flying for the first time of his life, and had crouched on the broom in fright. The move however, made his broom zip forward, and he was quickly followed by an upset teacher who was trying to catch him, yelling instructions at the same time.

Looking back to what happened in front of him, Harold noticed that Madam Pomfrey had interrupted her course too, to jog after the departing brooms. Malfoy had seized the opportunity to taunt the Gryffindors.

"I knew the dunderheads couldn't get something past their thick skulls! They even forget their Remembrall!" and he produced the glass ball. "I found it where you were sitting with Pomfrey. It's a shame, really."

"Hey!" yelled Ron Weasley. "It's Neville's! Give it back!"

"You want it back, Weasel? Catch it, then." and Malfoy threw the little ball in the air with all his might. Ron, who was sitting on a hovering broom already, shot after it. Unbeknownst to most of the people present, Ron was one of the most accomplished fliers in their year, having spent his whole childhood playing pick-up games of Quidditch with his brothers. That's also why he was such a fan of Quidditch.

The red-haired boy shot after the glass ball as if it were a Snitch and caught it barely inches before it smashed on a tower wall. He smiled at the catch and shot back before any of the teachers saw him. After all, Hooch had clearly said to just hover, not fly. His shot of luck stopped short, though, as a stern yell caught him just as he landed.

"Mister Weasley!"

The addressed boy turned around and paled, while Malfoy smirked. From the tower he had just left, a red-faced professor McGonagall was addressing him.

“Come up here immediately! On foot!”

Harold pitied the departing redhead as McGonagall was known not to get angry often, and when she was...

“He shouldn’t have flown.” said Susan as they were going back to the castle. All the students were discussing the event, some placing bets on Ron’s punishment while others were discussing Neville’s wounds. The boy had been found by the two teachers in a rose bush, his wrist broken.

“Did you want Neville’s Remembrall broken instead?” Harold asked her.

“Well... no. But he still shouldn’t have left when the teacher expressly told us not to.”

“Oh, come on, Susan. It’s a magical school, here, and there are dangers in each classroom. Remember our first Herbology lesson?”

“Still...”

“What do you think about Malfoy?” asked Harold, trying to derail his friend’s thoughts from Ron.

“I don’t know... he should be punished, sure, but he didn’t break a direct order, though.”

“I’m sure Malfoy will never break a direct order from a teacher, Susan.” he said, looking her in the eye. “But he will do whatever he can to make others do it.”

“We’ll just have to denounce him, then.”

“Alright, alright. Let’s just hope that next time he does that, there will be with as many witnesses as today.”

And they went to their common room. Once there, Susan found Hannah and they started to discuss the latest Witch Weekly issue with a second year who happened to be reading the magazine there. Harold smiled, and gathered his belongings to head for his study group's daily meeting.

Two hours afterwards, in Gryffindor's common room...

The red-faced redhead entered the almost deserted common room and erupted in a giant whoop of joy. Dean and a bandaged Neville, who were playing Exploding Snap, looked at each other inquiringly, before going to their classmate.

"Hey, Ron, what's up?" asked Dean.

"Sorry." Ron answered. "I just had to let it out."

"What? Why?"

"Well, I went to McGonagall, and she dragged me through several corridors. I was freaked out of my mind. I thought I was going to be expelled, you know? But she just went to the fifth-year Charms period and fetched Wood."

"Wood?" asked Neville. "Oliver Wood?"

"Yes!" answered Ron excitedly. "Our Quidditch Captain!"

"Why did she want him?" Dean enquired.

"That's what I asked myself, but she took us in an unused classroom, and told him... ah, I still hear her words..." he said with a dreamy smile, before trying to imitate their Head of House. "Mr Wood, I just found your Seeker."

"WHAT?" the two others asked at the same time.

"Yes. When Oliver answered the same thing, she confirmed it and let the two of us together. Oliver asked me about Quidditch and I told

him that I played since I was old enough to mount a broom. You see,” he explained, “with five older brothers, we often played pick-up games of Quidditch at home, and, as the youngest, I often played Seeker.” he smiled widely. “And I refrained from whooping until I came back here. Oliver told me it would be a surprise for the other teams.”

The others were speechless for a moment, but eventually recovered.

Dean first. “Congratulations, mate.”

“Wow.” said Neville. “I thought you were going to be punished.” he added matter-of-factly.

“Oh, I have. McGonagall told me that if Gryffindor doesn’t win their first match, she’ll rescind the offer and give me detentions during each Quidditch match.”

“For the year?” asked Dean in concern. After all, should they lose, it was a harsh punishment for somebody who loved Quidditch as much as Ron.

“For the seven years.” he answered glumly.

A pause.

“You’d better win, then.” said Dean, patting him on the back and trying to sound encouraging.

“Yeah. We’d better win.” the redhead repeated, smiling. “But Oliver has high hopes on the team. The twins are incomparable beaters, and they spent the summer rehearsing new moves. Oliver plays Keeper, and he told me the chasers were very good. I don’t know who they are, though.”

Ron looked around, and spotted the singed deck of cards.

“So, you played for two hours straight?”

“Well, since I was pretty alone until Neville showed up, I finished my homework.”

Said Neville winced, patting his wrist bandage. “Just released from the nurse’s realm a few minutes ago.”

“We were killing the time until dinner.” finished Dean with an amused glint in the eyes.

“Dinner!” shouted Ron enthusiastically and the two others laughed. Since they first saw him at the feast, they had understood that the boy was eating like four. “What? I’m a-”

“-growing boy. We know.” interrupted Dean with a smirk.

On the way to the Great Hall, they were rejoined with Harold, Seamus and Hermione, and Susan, seeing them from a distance, trotted a bit to rejoin them too.

Remembering something, Ron dragged Dean a little behind, his face reddening again. “Err...” he said without conviction.

“What?”

“CanIcopyyourhomework?” he muttered.

“What?”

Ron sighed. “Is it alright if I copy your homework? With all the fuss about Quidditch, I sort of forgot about it.”

As low as he had wanted his voice to be, though, there were certain keywords which made a certain girl react. Hermione twirled around.

“ You forgot about homework? How can you forget about homework? And it’s not allowed to copy homework!” Hermione ranted, her mind on a set track. “You could have bad grades, and even be expelled!”

The two boys looked at each other, shrugging. Ron then tried to appease her by saying "But they won't know, if I change the words and switch paragraphs."

"Are you saying the professors are dumb, Weasley? They will know!"

Harold had walked a few steps back with Susan in tow, both equally interested by the by-play. "If he came to our study group, we could help him, though, right?" he asked her, trying to mollify her to help their distraught classmate.

She looked at the two of them for several seconds, before huffing. "Right. But don't procrastinate further, because we can't help you more than that."

"Huh... prostate?" asked Ron. "What is it?"

Hermione blushed a beet red, before yelling "Pro-cra-sti-nate! It means putting off your homework."

She then left toward the Great Hall, muttering about uncultured youth. At the same time, Ron was looking at her, mumbling "Mental. This one's mental."

"If you join our study group, you'll get used to it." said Harold, whom Ron had forgotten. The redhead jumped and, turning back to him, apologized about it.

"It's nothing." Harold said. "We meet every afternoon at 5:30, in the library."

Ron paled. "Don't tell me you spend all the afternoon there!"

"No!" Seamus chuckled. "It's merely a meeting point. We also spend time outside."

"Seamus? You belong to... that group?"

“That group, as you said, helps people doing their homework. You’re in or not?” asked Harold, before feeling a tug at his sleeve.

“Yes?” he said, turning around and meeting Susan’s gaze.

“Can I come, too?” she asked.

He smiled. “Of course. The more the merrier.” He saw her serious look and amended “I mean... the more, the more hard-working we get on our homework. Of course.”

“Yeah. I believe you.” she said, her tone denying her words. She was smiling, though. “See you later.” she said, before hurrying for the Great Hall too, leaving the five boys in the corridor.

“So, what were you doing earlier?” asked Ron to Harold, as the group resumed walking toward the food at a more sedate pace.

“Well... I went to the study group as usual. As everyone was almost done with the regular homework, Hermione and I just played chess before heading to dinner.”

“You play chess?” asked Ron eagerly.

“Yes. I’m not that strong, though.” answered Harold.

“In my trunk, I have a magical board I can bring tomorrow. Even if it was my grandfather’s, it’s still working.”

“I’m not sure the workaholics out there will still like it, but you can always bring it. You said it was magical? What is so special about it?” asked Harold.

Ron looked horrified that someone wouldn’t know about the wonderful properties of charmed chess boards, and he spent the rest of the walk to dinner explaining them to a nodding Harold, while the other three were discussing Neville’s potion.

At the Great Hall doors, though, three Slytherin boys were waiting for them.

“So, have you packed yet, Weasel? When is the expelling verdict carried out?” asked the blond menace.

“Watch your mouth, Death Eater spawn!” retorted Ron.

“Your filthy family doesn’t deserve the pureblood status, Weasel. You can’t even afford your own robes.” the blond guffawed and, at a sign from him, his bodyguards chortled too.

Ron was getting red behind the collar, and Harold noticed the Potion professor nearby, obviously waiting for a reaction from the Gryffindors.

“Come on, Ron, he’s not worthy.” he said, and proceeded to lead the redhead inside, with the three other Gryffindors around.

Malfoy, emboldened by their apparent lack of reaction, launched another tirade. “What is it, Shorty? Too afraid of us to discuss?”

Harold stopped mid-stride and turned around, smirking. “When I will have broken your gorillas’ fingers and beaten you to a pulp, then we’ll discuss.”

Despite Crabbe and Goyle’s frightened step back, Malfoy continued. After all, even if it was a shameful memory for him, he distinctly remembered winning a muggle fighting tournament. “You? Beat me to a pulp? Let me laugh! How do you think you can achieve that?”

“Easily. Especially when you don’t have your magic bracers.” Harold whispered, before leaving a blanching Malfoy on the doorstep. Quite disappointed that he hadn’t been able to remove points, Snape left the intersection, unseen by everyone.

Harold sat between Justin and Susan, and discussed with both about the apparently growing study group. Several times during the meal – which Malfoy incidentally skipped – he felt a burning sensation of being observed, and turned around to see Ron staring at him. The

redhead wasn't even talking with his friends. When he left the Hall, Harold heard someone run after him and turned around to see Ron skidding to a halt in front of him, while Hermione was looking at them curiously. He drew a deep breath. "What?"

"You know Malfoy." Ron wasn't asking a question.

Harold sighed again. "Let's find a proper place to talk." and he led them in an unused classroom, closing the door afterwards. He expanded his senses and found that no one else was near. Looking up, he was startled to see Ron with his wand drawn, looking around.

"What is it?"

"Did you feel that?"

Harold rolled his eyes. 'Here it comes again', he thought. "Feel what?"

"There was a surge of magic nearby."

"I know." answered Harold, kicking himself at the same time.

"What do you mean, you know?" asked Hermione.

"Let's say that I know and it's not dangerous, alright?" he said. As they weren't convinced, he showed his locket and told them a carefully prepared lie. "It came from this medallion. It's charmed to detect intruders. There's no one else here except us."

They bought it, though.

"Alright. So. How do you know Malfoy, and what did you tell him for him to pale and miss dinner?" asked Ron.

"Well... I'm a muggleborn, okay?" They nodded. "I've lived in several places in the world, and I once participated in a muggle tournament with my brother and... well... let's just say I made it to the finals. And there was that blond boy, who I knew I could beat, but he had bracers

which I'm sure allowed him to cheat. When he won, I just got his name from the board before passing out."

"I can understand that." said Hermione. "But if you saw his name, yours was on the board too, right? He should remember it and stay away from you."

"I think he'll stay away from us, now. But, about the name thing, from all we know about him, do you think he would actively try to remember his participation in a muggle fist fight?" Harold asked, grinning, although he crossed his fingers internally, hoping that Hermione wouldn't ask too many questions. She was way too clever for her own good.

They thought about it, before smiling as well, and they left the room, returning to their respective quarters.

The next weeks passed in a whirlwind of activities as everyone finally got into school's full swing. For her birthday, Hermione received a box of sweets from Ron and a book from Harold: *Magical Geniuses and Their Works*, both obtained through owl order, because it was on such a short notice. The next morning, Ron, who had complained time and again about the shame of playing Seeker on an old school broom, received a large package which needed at least half a dozen owls to carry. With it came a letter from his parents.

Dear Ron,

Congratulations on your selection in Gryffindor Quidditch team! Fred and George wrote us about that, but, knowing the twins, we asked confirmation. We are really proud of you, son, and wanted to show it. Your dad wanted to buy another muggle car to experiment, but we scraped that and got you this present instead. Several other persons contributed as well, and you should thank your Head of House profusely. Consider the broom an advanced Christmas present, though.

Your loving,
Mum

Once in the safety of their dorm, with Dean, Seamus and Neville waiting anxiously, Ron ripped the package open and fell in tears upon seeing what was inside.

“A Nimbus 2000! Can you believe it? My own broom!”

Life hadn't been easy on Ron. The youngest Weasley boy had always been given hand-me-downs from his older brothers. His clothes were more than used, his pet was Percy's and even his wand was Charlie's old one. That's why the mere fact of owning something new which wasn't food brought so much emotion from him. As a result, though, he was even more determined to win the next match and started the practises with enthusiasm, after thanking McGonagall like his mother said – profusely. Ron also showed himself more rarely at the study group, and had to be coached by his three dorm mates on many of his assignments.

Someone else was coming less often, too. Tracey Davis had begun showing dark circles around her eyes and alleged that the work was tiring her, using that as an excuse to progressively stop coming.

The academic life was going on full swing, now, and the school prepared to end October with an enormous feast, judging by the gigantic pumpkins growing in the gardens. For Harold, the only dark spot of the week was the Wednesday morning, when Snape constantly took points from him. Justin even joked once about the man just taking points because Harold breathed. Harold had read his books, though, and did his homework, but it never seemed enough for the man. At the end, he decided that Snape was the kind of sadist teacher needing some student to belittle in order to show off. And Harold, despite answering correctly to questions by now, was constantly the butt end of his jokes and jeers. He hadn't felt sure of himself enough to react or to seek the man out of the classroom, and the constant feeling of prying was beginning to tire him down.

That October, 30th, the day started as usual, with the Hufflepuff-Ravenclaw double period of Potions.

Snape barked after them as usual, and made a complicated potion recipe appear on the blackboard. He then retrieved the assignments, while the students started to brew today's potion quietly. After mere minutes, Snape decided to be his usual cheerful self and started to grill the students, starting with his preferred target: Harold.

“Thomson! What are the differences between aconite and monkshood?”

Harold looked up sharply. Of course, he knew his books. He also knew that, following the books' timeline, they shouldn't know about these ingredients before the Spring term.

“None.” he said, before returning to peeling his shrivelfigs.

“What?” asked Snape.

“None, sir.” Harold said, not looking up.

A stunned pause. Snape wasn't looking particularly happy.

“What part of the asphodel must be used and how is it prepared?”

A silence.

“Five points from Hufflepuff, Thomson. You'd better-”

“I wasn't informed you talked to me.”

Another shocked silence.

“Five other points from Hufflepuff for your cheek, Thomson! Now answer the question!”

“I'd say it depends on the potion used, but in our textbooks, they only speak about powdered roots, so I suppose it's the answer.”

“What?” the teacher's tone was ominous.

Harold sighed and looked up. All the Hufflepuffs groaned. That couldn't be good.

"Roots. Pow-de-red." A second of silence, before he added "Sir."

Snape was panting. How that... that dimwit... how dare he...

"Where do you find a bezoar?" he lashed.

"Goat's stomach. Sir." was the calm answer.

"What's a mandrake used for?"

"Restorative Draught, sir."

"Where do you get a lionfish's spine?"

"At the apothecary, sir. Are you quite finished? I need to stir my potion, now."

The class waited with baited breath, as Snape's face had progressively changed from its usual white to a deep red. The man was positively glowering as Harold looked down and resumed his stirring.

When the man recovered enough to speak, he barked "20 points for your rudeness and 20 other points for your wrong answers! Detention for a week! And... and... and you'll come with me to the Headmaster. Now."

"As you wish." said Harold, giving his ladle to a shell-shocked Susan before stepping out of his workplace. Snape grasped his shoulder in a grip which should have been painful if Harold hadn't just increased his skin toughness.

Snape seemed disappointed at the teen's lack of reaction and pushed him forward. "Walk." he said, and they left the stunned classroom.

Harold didn't know where the Headmaster's office was, and just walked idly, deciding that Snape would tell him if he went astray. When he arrived in a dead end, though, he turned back with a questioning gaze... and noticed that the teacher had his wand drawn. Harold steeled himself, ready to drop as soon as the man uttered a spell. The word he heard, though, was one he knew very well by now.

“Legilimens.”

He let himself be hit with it. He distinctively felt Snape invading his mind again, but this time, the man was inquisitive and vengeful. Thankfully, as to appear more "real" should he have a meeting with the Sorting Hat again, Harold had duplicated his academic and Hogwarts-related memories so that they were in Harold's mind as well as Harry's. Snape purposefully destroyed these duplicates, before removing traces of his passage. The man was skilled, true, but he had been misled. Harold decided to play along for a moment, just to see what the man would do with a witless student.

He blinked. “Mister?”

Snape looked at him inquiringly. “Who am I?”

“I don't know, mister. Where am I?”

“You are a dimwit and you'll stay there.” and Snape whirled around, wanting to get back to his own classroom.

“Yes mister, but I don't want to be alone! I want to stay with you.” and Harold started to trot alongside him.

“NO! Stay back!” ordered the man.

“But, mister, I'm afraid of the dark! Please!” he begged, doing his best acting so far.

The man was undeterred, though, and pressed on. Harold could have followed, though, but he was left alone in the castle, and could make

a good use of his freed time. What to do, now? Decisions, decisions... His eyes lit up before closing.

First, he had to take an insurance on his life. He took a moment to rebuild his mind in the state it was before Snape's mass destruction, and then went to his Head of House's office. He got lucky, because she was just leaving for one of her Herbology periods. She gave him a strange look when he asked about the Headmaster's office location, but understood when he mentioned the Potion Master. He seemed truthful and it looked like Snape's job to send helpless student through the castle, so she answered, giving him the password as well.

Once he had passed the gargoyle, Harold ascended the stair, and knocked to the door, waiting with baited breath.

"Enter." said the Headmaster's voice.

He slowly pushed the door, and found himself in a strange office room, cluttered with many intricate items. Nothing was unusual per se, but he felt that several things weren't as they looked. And there were many portraits, too. An old and gentle voice interrupted his musings.

"What can I do for you, my dear...?"

"Thomson, sir. Harold Thomson. I have just been... kicked out of the Potion classroom, and the teacher wanted me to come here, so here I am."

"Well. I'm sure Professor Snape is right behind you, isn't he?"

"I don't know, sir. He just gave me the password and returned. I don't know why, perhaps he had something on the fire."

The Headmaster chuckled, and another chuckle came from a large seat in front of his desk.

"See, Cornelius?" asked Dumbledore. "Everything is going well. Nothing changed."

The large seat trembled as a fat small man extracted himself from it. "So true. So true." the man said.

"Well, Harold. I would love to have a discussion with a bright student, but my time is already taken. I must ask you to return to Professor Snape while I will continue to entertain our dear Minister of Magic."

"Minister? Sir? I'm sorry. Oh..." Harold hadn't realized the small man's identity, and a moment of confusion ensued.

"Now, now, my boy. It's alright." said the Minister of Magic soothingly.

"I'll leave, then. Sorry to have bothered you." said Harold, walking back to the door.

Just before he closed it, though, he heard the Minister saying "And give good old Snape my regards."

Harold then returned to the dungeons and ended up right behind the classroom's door. Sitting against the wall opposing it, he closed his eyes and slowly expanded his senses until he could pinpoint Snape's exact location. Once done, he resumed the first Potion lesson's activity: mind prodding, although this time, he went deeper. He had turned his own idea of defence into an attack technique, and started to dig into the man's mind.

When Snape had returned in the classroom, he had been feeling so elated about his revenge on the brat that he disregarded the relative chaos which reigned and went to his desk. The stunned students, though, resumed their brewing quietly, throwing anxious gazes to their Professor.

Said professor had been reading the assignments, when he started to feel an itching sensation on his forehead. He automatically rubbed his fingers, then his whole hand on it, but it didn't calm and intensified until a headache seized him, making him groan in pain. Wincing, he took a potion from one of his numerous pockets and downed it.

It didn't have any effect.

The upset teacher looked at the vial in wonder, even smelling it, but it really was a headache calming draught, which should have had an immediate effect. What was happening to him?

And, as suddenly as it had begun, the headache subsided and a knock was heard at the door. Nobody dared to move, and the Potion Master barked "Enter" from his desk.

It was Filch.

"Err... there's one of yer brats... just so you know..." and the man left, leaving the door open so that Snape could look at Harold Thomson sitting on the ground opposite him, and... smiling? He blinked. Of course not. He wasn't smiling. It must have been an illusion.

"Well... what are you waiting for? Enter!" he barked again.

"As you wish, mister." Harold answered from outside, and he went to his place. Under the bewildered teacher's gaze, he checked at the cauldron, thanked Susan, and went to slice some horned slugs before adding them.

"What in the hell?" asked Snape.

"What?" asked the teen innocently. "I went to Dumbledore, like you asked me to. And, by the way, the Minister asked me to send his regards to "Good old Snape." too." he added, looking the teacher in the eye. He had half the mind to add "but I don't see any Good Snape around, only an old one, so it must be someone else." but he refrained at the last second. The situation was already tensed like a violin string.

A very long pause ensued, while Harold resumed his brewing and Snape didn't move at all. The other merely followed the recipe's steps, not really caring about their potion at all. Thankfully, none of the ingredients were volatile today.

"Who... who are you?" Snape finally managed to mutter.

Harold froze. And immediately kicked himself. The question had been expected. He looked up and smiled. "I'm Harold Thomson. I'd say that it's nice to meet you but, as the feeling wouldn't be returned, I'll abstain."

"You can't be!" Snape said, his tone defiant.

"Why?" asked Harold.

"You must be some... Polyjuiced impostor!" Snape drew his wand, and swished it in a complicated move, while chanting "Revealo imbibus effectus."

Nothing happened.

"No! I can't believe it's you."

"You'd better."

"There is... there are... other ways..." the man was looking left and right while Harold looked at him impassibly.

"I know!" Snape jumped to his feet again and intoned "Finite incantatem."

Now, that was a very bad idea, thought Harold. Snape was a powerful wizard. More powerful than Josh ever was, and Harold felt the glamour on his eyes fade away. He groaned and closing his eyes, concentrating on rebuilding the illusion through his other ability.

"Open you eyes!" Snape barked.

At the same time, Harold was focusing on a colour. 'What was it, again? Grey? No, brown. Let's give it a try.'

He concentrated for a second, feeling the magic at work, and then opened his eyes.

And the bell sounded the period's end. Most of the cauldrons were a mess of unsupervised heating. The only usable potions came from two cauldrons out of the seven pairs, one of which being Susan and Harold's. The usual score for a Potion class, anyway.

Snape absently watched as the two pairs put bottles of potion on his desk. It didn't need a rocket scientist to determine that whoever was in detention tonight would be scrubbing cauldrons. Wait... it was Harold anyways.

A short time later, a red-faced Susan was dragging Harold by the sleeve toward Hufflepuff's cellar, ignoring the flow of students headed for the Great Hall. When there, she whirled around and demanded "What was that?"

"What was what?" he asked innocently.

"Don't play that game with me! I thought we were friends!"

His mood darkened considerably. How couldn't she see that Snape was an abusing teacher and needed someone to put him back where he belonged?

"Is this all you think about? Because I answered truthfully to an obnoxious teacher?"

"He's a teacher!" she shrieked, as if it was the only reason to respect anyone.

"He has been a human being long before being a teacher, you know? Teachers can have defaults! They can be wrong!"

"You have the Headmaster to report him to, then. And what was it with the broom?"

"Huh? What broom?" he was quite taken by surprise by the abrupt change of subject.

“Still playing innocent?” she asked sarcastically. “Okay, I’ll refresh your memory: Thursday, September 12th, 4:30pm. Your broom shoots up and you were going to jump 10 feet to retrieve it.”

“What? No...”

“Don’t deny it! You were ready to jump and at the last second you looked around and caught Hooch looking at you.”

“Well... err...”

“And today, you play the cool student and manage to get 50 points taken from the House. Where is the respectful Harold I made friends with? I don’t even recognized you this morning!”

“I’m here, Susan. Listen, points aren’t the most important-”

Oops. Knowing Susan, it wasn’t the best thing to say. Hermione was really rubbing on her.

“Points aren’t important?” she was practically shrieking and tears began to flow. “It’s our life we build here! Our future! And I can’t let you ruin mine! Our friendship is over, you hear me? It’s over!”

She turned and ran through the girls’ dormitories archway. A few seconds later, her dorm door could be heard slamming.

Harold was upset. Not only did he lose points because of the twisted teacher, but the man was starting to cost him his friends, too! He decided to do something about it, and decided to go to the man’s quarters and do something about his mind right there. Remembering about his earlier problems, he waited for the next early morning to act.

He came back from the Astronomy period at 1:30am and went to bed like the others, but he didn’t sleep and waited for the others to snooze before starting to work his plan out. He had reflected about it during the previous evening, before the Astronomy lesson, and had realized that it was quite risky, which was why he now took the Ravenclaw

ring from his locked to put it on. The second he did so, though, he felt the ring emit a wave-like magical signal, and he swore.

How could he not think about it? Put on one of Hogwarts Founders' magical garb while in the school! Of course it would raise an alarm. He tried to remove the ring unsuccessfully for a minute, but stopped when feelings and emotions started rushing toward him from everywhere at once. Recognition, gratitude, curiosity, eagerness. He collapsed under the strain.

"Hello again, Harry, and may I offer my congratulations on joining Helga's House? She was my best friend, you know." said the blue-clad woman, her eyes twinkling. "Or should I say "Harold" now?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, trying to hide his uneasiness.

"Relax." answered Rowena. "I know about you because I knew about you beforehand. The castle, however, despite having grown in consciousness and magical strength, is unable to enter anyone's mind, and therefore unable to report your presence."

He exhaled loudly, but she wasn't finished.

"Conversely, it is quite happy to have found a reminder of my old self, and if, as I understand it, you want to hide that, you'll have to ask it. It's fortunate that you did this so early in the morning, or it would have been discovered quickly."

"Ask?" asked Harold, not quite understanding.

"Yes, ask. It's really alive, you know?" she seemed to reflect about things a bit, before nodding. "Alright. Each of the Founder's private quarters was located where your House is, except Helga's. It seems her rooms have been taken up by the kitchen... and the old cellar became dorms for your House."

She grew silent, as if pondering things, while Harold distinctly felt someone or something discussing with her. After a few seconds, she shrugged. "Whatever. Sorry for the wait. I couldn't prevent myself

from looking at every little change made on the castle. It has been a thousand years, you know.”

“It’s alright.” he said, quite astounded that a Founder would ask for forgiveness from him. He blinked, before remembering the previous topic. “You said something about me asking Hogwarts something.”

“Yes. You have to establish a mind connection between the two of you, and then you’ll be able to communicate with it easily.”

“How do I do that?”

“It would rather be “Where do I do that.” Each of us Founder had a way to do that and, not knowing the others’, I can only tell you mine. You simply have to find my private study. Its entrance is located near my House’s common room entrance.”

“But... I don’t even know where it is.”

“I know, I know. I’ll just give you a memory containing the map to it. Once you’ll be able to talk to it, Hogwarts will furnish its map at a moment’s notice.”

“Well... I can only thank you so much, milady.”

She laughed. It was a pleasant high and crystalline sound. “No need to thank me, my dear boy. After all, as long as you wear that ring, I enjoy living as a part of you. So it’s me who should thank you.”

The two of them looked at each other, before the woman prodded his shoulder. “You should go, now. Better take advantage of your early waking hour to actually find my study. I should tell you to hurry before your Headmaster notices the castle’s state, but the man is gone, or so Cassie told me.”

Harold at paled at the mention of his Headmaster, but his slightly afraid expression turned into a curious one.

“Gone? Cassie?”

“Yes.” Her eyes were twinkling amusedly. “Cassie is my own nickname for Hogwarts. After all, it’s a diminutive of “castle”, isn’t it? And, speaking about your Headmaster, according to her memory, he left yesterday evening, heading towards America...” She waited a second for effect. “...in search of Harry Potter.”

Harold found himself in such an alarmed state that he woke up, panting. It took him a few minutes to get his bearings right again, and, shaking his head to remove any traces of sleepiness, he escaped the cellar.

Rowena had astutely affixed the directions to her office to his own memory of the castle, and he made a good use of it to reach the place. He entered an unused classroom – which was, if Rowena’s indications were true, her quarters’ reception room – and spoke the required Latin sentence in front of the back wall’s window.

Said window immediately went dark blue and opened like a door, and Harold entered a well-furnished office – if you didn’t take into account the thick layer of dust on everything. Still following the Founder’s memory, he went to a low cupboard and opened it with the ring. Inside rested several stone bowls full of a silvery liquid, which use he couldn’t fathom, but each labelled differently than the others. Following the instructions, he took one of them out, carefully depositing it on the cupboard top. He then bent, until his nose touched the liquid, and entered the swirling liquid.

He took a cursory glance around, and saw that Rowena was there also, although she had a younger appearance. They were in a circular room, without any door. The moment he decided to ask where they were, though, another presence shimmered into view.

It was exactly that, a presence. It wasn’t human, nor animal. It was a crude statue which had barely human attributes.

“Nice to meet you again, Cassie. You have progressed, I see.” said Rowena.

The statue turned its head toward her and nodded.

The woman then pushed Harold forward and said "This young man wishes to stay anonymous. Can you hide his presence from any prying eye?" she paused for half a second before adding. "Can you help him moving around as well?"

The statue looked at him, and he felt the weight of its experience as well as the exuberant youthfulness of its mind. It nodded, and Harold had the eerie feeling that it winked at him.

"Thank you." he said, and the statue shimmered out. The next second, both the woman and the boy followed suit and Harold found himself back in Rowena's study. He took a second to check if his "I'm being observed." feeling was there, but it wasn't, and he almost jumped in joy, barely restraining himself. After all, it wouldn't do to knock and break Rowena's ancient artefacts, would it? Very carefully, he put the stone bowl back at its place in the cupboard, and took a second to contemplate using the others.

"Later." a small voice said in the back of his head, and he smirked before closing and locking the cupboard's doors. He turned around and noticed that the office door, being closed, has transformed into a see-through pane. 'Thoughtful.' he reflected. 'One can look out before exiting so as not to get caught.'

"And it sees through invisibility spells and concealing charms." Rowena's voice added smugly, making Harry reflect about the charms involved in such a feat.

As nobody was there, Harold merely stepped through and paused just a second to check that the study's entrance still looked like a window. After all, people searched for secret passages in dead ends, but never on windows.

He had wanted to exact revenge on the Potion Master but, that day, he constantly felt Cassie tugging at his mind, preventing any form of deep concentration. The castle's spirit was like a lonely dog who had

just found a person to play with: always jumping around, bringing strange items and being generally friendly. The problem was that Harold couldn't very well tell that to others, and he went through the day without really taking his fellow students and classes into account. He also completely missed today's meeting of their study group.

Susan was visibly still upset, snubbing him everywhere, and she didn't even show herself at the study group herself, even if he wasn't there to notice it. Tracey had long since disappeared from the group, but there was also one disappearance which defied the unwritten rules of logic: Hermione was missing.

When Harold entered the Great Hall, he remarked Susan's absence and asked about it to Justin, who pointed out the girls' afternoon absence. The curly-haired student launched into a blow-by-blow recounting of what they did while their studies leader was off, but Harold wasn't listening anymore, his gaze unfocused.

Cassie's signals were different.

From playful, they became alarmed a few seconds ago. He focused on his connection to the castle and asked what was wrong, and he almost choked when the pictures arrived. Quirenus Quirrell, the Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, was bringing a... huge... and monstrous... creature, in the school!

He surprised Justin, jumping off the bench in the middle of the boy's sentence. A long time before professor Vector would warn the whole school, Harold slipped out of the Great Hall almost unnoticed. However, he saw his route to the dungeons blocked by Malfoy first, and then Filch, and it took a bit of time to modify their memories. Once done, the long-legged monster had already moved around, and Quirrell wasn't with it anymore. Harold concentrated to get a global feeling of everyone in the castle. Several professors were scouring the school, and Snape was waiting somewhere... waiting... for Quirrell. Susan was in her dorm. And, at the same time...

He heard a scream nearby, quickly followed by another.

... Hermione and Tracey were in the girls' toilets, with the troll.

He started to run, missed the red and gold missile tumbling from an adjoining corridor, and suddenly found himself in a tangle of limbs from which emerged the not-so-surprised face of Ronald Weasley.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“I could ask you the same thing. I just followed you, and stumbled across Malfoy and Filch. Both were looking lost. Lost! As if they had just been Obliviated! And these screams...”

“There’s a... creature... in the girls’ toilets.”

“Let’s call the professors, then.”

“They are too far.” Seeing the redhead’s confused face, he explained more. “Hermione and Tracey are inside, too. We have to act now.”

And he stood up, before charging in the toilets. Once there, he had the misfortune of stopping, and Ron ran into him, once again pushing him on the floor. ‘Let’s not make a habit of this.’ was all he could think coherently, before looking at the huge and ugly stump of grey flesh, vaguely humanoid in shape, which surely didn’t have a place in a girls’ toilets. In front of them stood a very very large creature, armed with its personal odour and a club as large as a century-old tree trunk. Hermione was in a corner, shivering in fright, and Tracey was in another, mumbling incoherently.

“By Merlin!” whispered Ron. “It’s a troll!”

Said troll seemed to have had problems choosing a target, but he was now decided, and raised his weapon to strike...

“Move, Hermione! Move!” Harold shouted.

The yell attracted the creature’s attention to him, and his attack missed the petrified girl by mere inches.

“What can we do? What can we do?” asked Ron.

Harold looked at the frightened girls, at the enormous creature, and took his decision. The hell with being discreet! These girls needed help, and they didn't know enough magic to put the beast down. He turned to the frightened Ron and shook him.

“I'll distract him, and you get her! You hear me? Go grab her and flee!”

The other teen had a flicker of understanding in his eyes, and that was all Harold needed.

Turning around toward the scene again, he first tried his control over time, extending his arms and internally screaming.

‘STOP!’

It had been a long time since he last had done it, and he didn't know if the numerous modifications brought to his mind allowed it to work. Only a bit slower... only a bit. It seemed to work, though, as the troll's downward strike, heading toward Hermione, was slowed to a crawl. Ron hadn't moved yet. Damn. With his current speed and her squatting position, Harry couldn't get her out without hurting her.

Harold concentrated again, focusing on increasing his skin's toughness again, as much as possible. And he finally closed his eyes for a mere second, serenity flowing in his veins, along with a sense of what to do. A sense of which moves were the right ones to execute next.

As if he was in the slow-motion scene, he ran quickly around the slow-moving troll and jumped onto one of the numerous basins, before crouching on the one nearest the creature and Hermione. Taking aim, he launched himself against the troll's club. It moved slightly out of the way, but not enough so that Hermione wouldn't be harmed. He instantly took another decision, jumping on the sinks again, and, using his feet as anchors, he pressed with all his might

against the slowly descending club. A foot too close... a few more inches...

He was so focused on his task that he didn't register that the metal sinks on which he had taken anchor were bending around his feet, leaving footprints. At last, the club landed clear of Hermione, tearing metal and throwing tile shards in every direction. Harry merely grabbed a plank from the broken toilet stalls, and put it between Hermione and the incoming shower of shards. He then took a breath and noticed that Ron had finally started moving. Good.

Next...

He looked up at the troll, and jumped on the sinks again, using the prop to launch himself onto the creature's stupid-looking head. Once sitting on its shoulders, he noticed that his control over time was slipping. The people around him were moving a tad quicker. Ron had almost reached Hermione, and the troll was raising his weapon again, looking at it and wondering why it missed.

Closing his eyes, Harold remembered a particular scene. His brother's broken arm. The scoffing monks. The pile of clay tiles. The anger he had felt. Yes, he could feel it again. He didn't know that he was putting quite the show, but no one looked anyways.

He raised his right arm, and slammed it down on the creature's head. Hard.

The creature had hard bones. It was the only thing which protected its species against decimation. Harold had added magic to the strike, though. His stone-like hand crushed the bone, and the little bit of grey matter underneath didn't stand a chance. Harold made good use of the still slightly slowed time to jump down and fetch Tracey. Contrarily to Hermione, the Slytherin had merely sat in shock, so no limb was ripped out of its socket when he cautiously took her in his arms.

The troll was wobbling on unsteady legs for a moment, and Harold jumped over several scattered planks and under flailing arms as thick as himself, until he was standing beside Ron and Hermione at the

toilet's entrance, a semi-conscious Tracey in his arms. They looked as the beast wobbled a last time before falling sideways, destroying several more sinks and stalls, and shaking the room like a small earthquake.

After a moment of bated breath, Ron, whom Hermione was still clutching desperately, spoke up in a shaky voice.

"Is it... Is it dead?"

"It doesn't move." answered Harold, slowly recovering a regular heartbeat. "Doesn't breathe. Sure seems dead to me."

The troll thick leather-like skin hadn't yielded when he struck it, though, and he immediately took a decision. He went to Ron and Hermione's minds, and slightly changed their immediate memory. He didn't have the time to guess if they were good liars or not, and he suspected that Ron wasn't anyways. For them, the troll would have fallen victim of his own club, cleverly levitated and dropped by Ron's Wingardium Leviosa.

It was just in time, too, as several teachers barged in the war zone look-alike. Appropriately, they were the Heads of House – bar Snape, who was being brought to the infirmary.

"Sweet Merlin!" said McGonagall upon arriving first. She put her hand to her heart in shock.

"By my mimbulus Mimbletonias!" swore Sprout.

"What happened?" asked Flitwick.

The teens were quite at a loss for words. What were they going to say?

"We heard about the troll..." began Harold.

"...and we knew Hermione and Tracey weren't in the Great Hall during the alert." Ron continued.

“Yes, because we share a study group.”

At that, the teachers registered the situation. Four students, four Houses. They looked at each other. Was it a sign that the Hat's warnings were true? Were they in time of need? Was inter-Houses cooperation necessary?

Ron hadn't caught the teachers' private glances, and continued. “We heard a scream and arrived to see the... the troll.”

“And then... it's kind of blurry, really. There were shouts, and the girls were being targeted. Ron used the Levitation spell, I think.” said Harold, finishing with a look between a blushing Ron and a proud Flitwick.

“It was nothing, really.” Ron managed to utter. “The club fell on the troll's head.”

“I'd say he's dead, but I'm not sure.” concluded Harry.

“What were you thinking? Taking on a troll this size!” exclaimed McGonagall.

“You could have been killed!” Sprout cried out.

“In the meantime, I think these gentlemen deserve some points, ladies.” Flitwick piped in. “If they hadn't been there, we would have to deplore more casualties. I'd say that 10 points each would be a good thing.”

“Yes, a good thing indeed.” stated McGonagall.

Harold was looking at Flitwick with wide eyes. “Casualties, sir?”

Flitwick looked at him, then at McGonagall, who shook her head. “Well... everybody will be told the story later, I guess.”

The boy closed his eyes, activating his connection with Cassie. He quickly learnt about the fight that had occurred between Quirrell and Snape. The castle hadn't registered the evil presence of Voldemort, though, and, despite knowing that something was off, Harold didn't suspect anything about a third partner. Quirrell was dead, now, and Snape was recovering in the Staff part of the Hospital wing. He smirked internally. Snape, being seen lying between his students? Not likely. He opened his eyes again, and nodded.

"Harold, if you can release Miss Davis, I'll put her in a stretcher and bring her to the Hospital wing." said Sprout.

The boy started to comply, but the semi-conscious girl grasped him tighter.

"She must be in shock." stated McGonagall. "Can you take her there yourself, Mister Thomson? Or should I conjure a stretcher for the two of you?" her lips twitched, and Harold, picturing the situation, blushed.

"No, Professor. I'll... we will be alright."

"Good lad." said Sprout, before looking at Hermione. "Well, make it the four of you. I'm sure Miss Granger needs a potion or two."

"Mister Weasley? You can escort her?" asked McGonagall.

Ron nodded, and the four teens left the teachers to deal with the large and smelly corpse.

"Well..." started McGonagall, drawing her wand. "Let's get to work."

She promptly transfigured the dead troll into a small cupboard. On top of being an impressive work of Transfiguration, it also confirmed the creature's death, since transfiguring living creatures was much more difficult. Her two colleagues looked at the piece of furniture for a second, before wrinkling their nose.

"No." said Sprout. "The troll's stench is one we can't hide. I suggest we just get rid of it and repair the room."

“Alright.” said Flitwick, before turning toward the sinks. “I’ll start wi-” he stopped suddenly.

“Filius?” asked McGonagall. “What is it?”

The diminutive teacher didn’t answer, and his two colleagues looked to where he was staring. Transforming the huge troll into a small cupboard had uncovered a singular object.

“What is it?” asked Sprout.

“It’s a sink.” stated McGonagall absentmindedly.

“ Thank you, captain Obvious.” muttered Flitwick, before approaching.

“What do you think caused it?” enquired Sprout.

“I don’t know.” answered Flitwick. “But I’m sure these four hid something from us.”

In front of them, half destroyed by the troll’s fall, was a metal sink. With a deeply embossed footprint.

The Potion Master didn’t wake for a full week, and the students – the non-Slytherins, that is – breathed a bit. Almost all of them enjoyed the fact that their Headmaster, a renowned Alchemist himself, was replacing the greasy-haired teacher. No student brewed anything that week, but the first years learnt quite a bit about the basic precautions over potion making. Incidentally, the other years did, too, which brought a deep frown on Dumbledore’s already wrinkled forehead – the old man also had to find a replacement for Quirrell and treat other problems, like the Slytherin House.

Tracey Davis had awakened after a day of rest and she told Harold, Hermione and Ron about her House mates’ attitude at her being friend with other Houses. For them, she was a traitor and she had constantly been harassed in her common room and even in her own

dorm. Despite this, the returning Headmaster had put her back in the dungeons, and she started to miss the meetings again.

At the end of the Potion-free week, the first Quidditch match of the season took place, starting at 11am, and pitting the Gryffindors against the Slytherins. It was a pitched affair, because, despite Madam Hooch warnings about wanting a fair game, the Slytherin played their best tactics, one of which consisting in offing the opposing Keeper and Seeker by whatever mean possible.

After half an hour in the game, Gryffindor was leading by 50 to 0, and Oliver Wood saw an approaching Quaffle. Just as he lunged with his broom toward the threat, he also noticed an incoming Bludger in the corner of his eye. 'Devious' what all he thought as he swerved his course to still protect his goals while avoiding the Bludger. What he didn't see, though, was the other Bludger aimed to the path he had had to take to avoid the first, from behind.

WHACK!

The Gryffindor team and supporters groaned as their Keeper and Captain fell to the ground – which, thankfully, was permanently charmed with Cushioning Charms: no need for heavier injuries than what the players got in the air.

Ron was overlooking the stadium from the Seeker's usual vantage point, and he swore internally. Not only were the goals almost defenceless, but their whole team was at a disadvantage. The team hadn't practised underhanded moves, and couldn't take their opponents off the game like that.

However, with the twins doing what they could to guard the goals, it wasn't completely lost. Especially as they succeeded in using their new moves against the opposition. One of them consisted in beating a Bludger with both bats, thus doubling its velocity. It was a tricky move to do as both Beaters had to be in perfect coordination, but the twins seemed to share a mind link and they did the move a dozen times, disrupting the enemy's Chaser formation enough to prevent the same number of goals.

After another half hour, the score was tied at 90, and Ron had escaped more Bludgers than he had in his entire childhood. The constant onslaught had also forced him to move around the stadium and he was thankful that his broom was performing so well, otherwise, he would have followed his Captain to the infirmary.

That's during one of his low swoops to avoid the two Bludgers that he caught a glimpse of gold. The Snitch was under the Slytherin Keeper! If the tricky little ball was hiding under players, it was normal that they hadn't seen it yet. He finished his move slowly and found himself right under his target. A quick look around confirmed that nobody had seen the fluttering ball, and he shot forward.

Hooch blew her whistle to denounce a foul from the Gryffindor Seeker against the opposing Keeper, but, seeing that the younger player had the gold ball in his hand, she raised her arms.

“End of the match! Gryffindor wins!”

Ron landed, and looked around, a wide smile on his face. Behind the applauding team members, he spotted the Gryffindors, as well as many members of the study group holding thumbs up. To his utter shock, he also saw his usually stern Head of House winking at him.

The party in the Gryffindor common room had already started when their Captain was released from the infirmary and came through the portrait hole, sporting a bandaged head. Ron had already had too many butterbeers and was slumped unconscious in an armchair near the fire. The others saw their Keeper and cheered, something which made him wince. He was then prompted to speak up.

“Glad to be here. It's definitely a better atmosphere than the infirmary.”

Some students confirmed it loudly and other laughed.

“Especially as Snape holds half the Hospital wing.”

Shouts and jeers could be heard, directed against their nemesis House's Head.

Oliver got taken in the moment and began to make the show. "You know what I heard there?" he whispered, although everyone heard it.

Interested faces looked at him in askance.

"I've heard hisses behind the door!" he exclaimed.

"I bet he was talking to snakes!" yelled Jack Smith, an inebriated seventh year.

"Yeah!" added his friend John Doe, equally intoxicated. "We spent six years with him. He took more points from us than any other House."

Jack nodded, before speaking up again. "The man is evilness incarnate. All Parselmouths are. I'm sure..." he wobbled a bit and straightened against a nearby chair. "I'm sure he was a Death Eater."

In the shocked silence, John thoughtfully added "And still is, old chap. And still is."

To be continued in next chapter: Hunting Gifts...

Where did I put staves in there?
Except the troll's club of course.
In next chapter, no recourse,
And the hunt will proceed there.

Chapter 11 – Hunting Gifts

posted August 17th, 2005

During the week following the troll incident, Dumbledore found a replacement teacher for Quirrell. The Defence Against the Dark Arts position was now filled by a French woman going by the name of Peronille Fortin. Despite the suddenness of her recruitment, she succeeded at least in interesting the students, which always helped in furthering their studies. It was unsure, though, whether the older male students were interested in her subject or the teacher herself. Believing that, especially in her subject, experience came from experiment, she split the courses between theory and practical, with an emphasis on the latter. Defence Against the Dark Arts quickly became one of Harold's favourites, except that he often had to hold back not to send opponents into walls or furniture.

He summed his adventures in a few mails between him and his family. Before starting school, he had thought that he could have Apparated back and forth between Hogwarts and Geneva, and hadn't bought any mail familiar. He had quickly found something strange, though, and realized that Hogwarts: A History wasn't just discouraging the students to Apparate. It really wasn't possible to Apparate in Hogwarts. He had gone to the gaseous reality once, only to find himself held in a transparent mould, as if the air had solidified. The walls he saw around him had been the same grey colour as usual, but they seemed hard as steel, not cloudy like before. He had returned to normalcy before someone could walk in, and since then resolved to use the school owls for his regular mail.

Soon after the Quidditch match, the Potion Master recovered enough health to take his professorship back. Or so it seemed. Severus Snape had left the Hospital wing during the night following the game. When the Headmaster enquired about his leave, he curtly answered that, now that he was fully capable again, he would take the lessons back, thank you very much. And it was true. The potion lessons continued with Snape, like before. There was a difference, though.

Snape wasn't giving them the right potions to brew.

He was still following the program with most of the students, but the older students found themselves brewing increasingly difficult potions, some of which were downright nasty. One of them, for instance, looked exactly like a Blood Replenishing potion when finished, but the effect was exactly the opposite. Charles Wragham, a fifth year muggleborn student from Hufflepuff, experienced the potion troublesome nature when, while brewing it, he inadvertently breathed on top of the fuming preparation, and his nose started to bleed uncontrollably. He had to get out of the classroom, losing House points in the way, in order to be healed in the infirmary. During the whole incident, Snape was sporting his usual scowl and it added to the man's reputation of evilness.

He also didn't give everybody the same potion to brew. Instead of writing a recipe on the board, he handed parchments for each of the working pairs, and several people noticed that they seldom used the same ingredients than their neighbours. It could be interpreted as a way to prevent cheating, but Snape wasn't even grading them anymore, and some of the students began to whisper that the potions the Slytherin brewed were already dark and highly illegal.

On top of that, the man skipped all public meals, and some gossiping students inferred that Snape's vampire side had awakened and that he could only consume blood. Several graduates who had siblings in the school even reported him strolling in Diagon and Knockturn Alleys – especially the latter.

For strange reasons, the man also began delivering detentions at random. Only when Harold got his, a week short of December, did he understand why. The man made him scrub cauldrons and, as soon as he had his back turned, he used Legilimency to browse his mind. It brought quite a shock.

The Potion Master had been skilled and brutal in his bout of Legilimency last time. This time, it was different. It wasn't brutal, but very efficient. And it didn't leave the same sensations. As if it was someone else casting the spell. Someone not just skilled in the art of reading minds, but an expert. And it was cold. As cold as ice.

Harold, though, had had a vision one day, of his mind being read like that, and of the possible consequences, and he had taken a long time to rebuild his fake mind completely. The teacher read his mind without anything transpiring from the underlying Harry Potter, and the boy finished his detention without any other happenstance.

In the meantime, the study group was faring pretty well. Students stronger in a subject would help the weaker ones, and got help themselves in return. Globally, the grades of first-year students were rising a bit – although the Slytherins, not mingling with the study group, experienced nothing of the sort. Susan and Harold had put their disagreement behind them, and became friendly again, despite Harold's almost constant absence from their common room. When confronted about it, he merely said that he was meeting people in the Library or elsewhere in the school. That was the truth, as several of the boy's acquaintances were in other houses, and the school didn't have an inter-house common room. It was one of the things Harold wanted to discuss with his Head of House, but he had other fishes to fry, first of all, their Slytherin friend.

Tracey had stopped going to the study group's meetings. At least openly. On Saturdays, instead of meeting in the Library or another open place, the troll-witnessing foursome grouped in a hidden room, conveniently "found" by Harold and called Room of Requirements, to discuss about the school events, the studies, and the Houses. The other week days, taking advantage of the position Slytherin was concerning grades, Tracey had succeeded in setting up a study group for the Slytherin first years. After several days, a few second years were interested and came regularly too. They were reviewing the bases of their education, while helping the others understanding them. After all, one never learns a subject so completely than when forced to teach it. From the first years, the only persons not coming were Crabbe, Goyle, and Malfoy, of course. The blond boy, who had begun sulking after the troll incident, was becoming more and more insufferable and proud as the weeks passed by, as if he knew something the other didn't.

On one of the "reduced inter-house study group" Saturday meetings, Ron didn't turn up and the three others discussed the recent events

as usual while waiting for him. When they finished, he still hadn't shown himself, and they separated, Tracey stealthily returning to her dungeons, while the two others went to Gryffindor tower – Harold knew where it was thanks to Cassie's presence at the back of his mind. When they stopped in front of the portrait of an overly large lady in a frilly pink dress, Hermione looked at Harold inquiringly.

“Now what?”

He didn't answer, and addressed the Fat Lady. “Good day, milady.”

“Good day, dear boy. I wish everyone was as polite as you.”

“I'm sorry for them. Would it be possible for us to enter if we aren't Gryffindor?”

“I must apologize, but you shall not. The rules had been enforced fifty years ago, after the Chamber incident, and only members of the House may enter.”

“The Chamber incident?” asked Hermione inquiringly.

The lady in pink looked as if she was biting her tongue. “I'm sorry. I shouldn't even have mentioned it. Please be kind and not ask about it again.”

Hermione looked like she wanted to anyway, but Harold looked at her with a frown, and she huffed before turning around.

Despite not given entry, Harold suspected that Cassie could help him circumvent that. He didn't want to raise suspicion, though, and lowered his expectations.

“If we cannot enter, can we ask if a certain person is inside, please?”

“And what is the sought person's name?”

“Ronald Weasley.”

“I will see what I can do.” she answered, standing from her plush seat before walking through the edge of her portrait.

A minute later, a damaged version of Ron Weasley opened the portrait, behind which the two others could hear music. It closed right afterwards and the singular boy looked at them. He had singed hair, his sweater was soggy, and he was unsuccessfully trying to remove an unrecognisable green goo from his face with a towel.

“What?” he asked through the cloth.

Harold and Hermione looked at him in wonder, then at themselves, before erupting in laughter.

“What?” the distraught boy asked again.

Hermione was the first to recover her breath. “Honestly, Ron, what happened?”

“The damn Lady appeared in an empty frame and called me.” At his words, said Lady huffed and left her frame again, but Ron didn’t notice her and continued. “I was so surprised I dropped my cards. Honestly! As if empty wooden frames were designed to hold messengers, and-”

“Cards? You were playing cards instead of... you know?” asked Hermione crossly, the two last words uttered in an angry whisper.

“What?” Ron enquired, and Hermione’s stern stance reminded him of the "club" meeting he had just missed. Looking at his feet, he mumbled “Sorry, but I was playing chess with Seamus, and I forgot about the time, and then the twins came with an improved deck of Exploding Snap, and we were playing...”

“Improved?” asked Harold.

Ron shrugged. "Yes. The twin pranksters calling themselves my brothers added other effects to the cards. As you can see." he gestured toward himself, and the other two chuckled again.

"What was that music?" asked Hermione, her previous outburst not forgotten, but kept for later.

"Oh, it's just Kenneth, playing the guitar."

"That was... unusual." said Harold, thinking aloud.

Ron looked unmoved. "What can I say? He plays what he wants to play, what's the matter?"

"I meant that, until now, I have never heard music in this school. It has been two and a half months since we came here."

"We could start a group." said Hermione, before giggling as the two boys looked at her with wide eyes. "It's a stupid idea, forget it."

"No, it's great!" said Harold.

"Yeah. It would be called "Hogwarts' Chipmunks" and we'd play at weddings." added Ron, smirking.

Harold looked at him. "I was being serious, Ron."

"Me too." Ron countered automatically, before registering the dark looks coming his way. "Alright, alright. Sorry."

A short pause ensued.

"What did you mean by being serious, Harry?" asked Ron through his towel, still trying to wipe the sticking goo.

A longer pause. Much longer.

"What did you call me?" asked Harold.

Ron shrugged. "Well, you're Harold; we can call you Harry, right? Like I'm Ronald, and you call me Ron. Are you alright?"

Harold wasn't exactly alright, but calmed himself quickly. "I'm alright. My name is Harold, though, and I'd rather you call me that."

"Same here." stated Hermione. "Nobody called me anything other than Hermione and lived to tell the tale."

The theatrical effect was annihilated when the portrait hole opened into her and she fell on the floor.

Recovering quickly, she stood up, wincing, before rubbing her sore bottom, blushing at the same time. In the doorway, two identical redheads looked at them with a wide grin.

"Looks like we made another victim, Gred." said the first.

"I'd say, Forge. I'll also say it's my job." was the answer.

"Mine."

The two continued in front of Ron's blasé look. Hermione looked offended, and Harold was amused and a little surprised that anyone could ask for the responsibility in such an event. Generally, people skirted responsibilities. But the bantering twins weren't normal people. They weren't normal wizards either.

Said twins went to the stairs, still discussing about the number of victims each of them had made. That's when Ron noticed their attire.

"Hey! Why are you holding your bats?"

The twins turned around, and Fred – or was it George? – answered "In case you forgot, we have a Quidditch practice right now."

"And you'd better hurry." continued the other twin. "Oliver like his players on time. And proper. You are still..."

“Sticky.” they both finished, before heading downstairs, laughing.

Ron muttered darkly, and Harold, judging it would be best to leave the somewhat livid boy alone, prodded Hermione and they took their leave. Ronald Weasley wasn't going to be happy. Especially as...

“Where in the Hell has this damn lady gone?” Ron's yell pursued them.

By mid-December, the snow had covered the stone castle and its dwellers had two minds about it. It was difficult to get outside more than a few minutes without catching a cold of some sorts, but, at the same time, it provided interesting opportunities for outside games. After all, they were all wizards and witches, and what's a mere cold against the Hospital wing's paraphernalia?

SPLASH!

The snowball crashed on the side of poor Hannah's face. Ernie Macmillan, a Hufflepuff who was always around her, took offence of Terry Boot's well-aimed shot and retaliated, throwing snow at the laughing Ravenclaw without even forming proper snowballs. The fight was in full swing, and very few of them didn't have a few "scars" in the form of snow sticking in places and melting slowly.

Earlier that morning, the study group had grouped to – as Hermione stated – "get the holidays homework out of the way." Harold, Ron, and several others suspected that, for the studious Ravenclaw, that meant more time for extracurricular studies during the holidays. However, after twenty minutes of unsuccessful concentration, Harold discreetly put the picture of an unwinding snowball fight in her mind. She had frowned, of course, because this wasn't the kind of thoughts she was used to have, but had dismissed the group nonetheless, and was now on the fight sidelines with the Patil twins. It hadn't meant they were going to be left unscathed, as a snowball or two had headed their way, but, after the first hit on her person, Hermione had drawn her wand, and efficiently Banished several other menacing snowballs toward their source.

After forty minutes of frolicking, the fifteen-or-so children were interrupted by a deep voice.

“Aye, firsties... Make way, please.”

Several students stood up and turned around to look at the voice owner. It wasn't a wise thing to do in the current situation, though, and several snowballs crashed into Ron's lanky frame, transforming him into a thin-looking snowman.

A booming laugh erupted from the giant in front of them. Most of them had already recognized the man who had led them through the lake to Hogwarts on their arrival.

Hagrid was chortling good-naturedly, but stopped when he saw Ron's disgruntled and snowy look.

“Sorry, me lad. Didn't want teh get ye drenched. Come to me hut, I'll get ye a good fire and tea.”

The enormous man dropped his load on the ground with a thundering sound, only a bit muffled by the snow, and the students' eyes widened. The man had been dragging a Christmas tree no smaller than he was, and thicker than any of them.

However, Ron was shivering, now, and he readily accepted the invitation. The others noticed the cold, as well as the advanced time, and they returned to the castle, commenting on the fight. Only Hermione and Harold stayed to help the quivering Ron on the way.

Once inside, Hagrid made them take a seat, pushing his dog, Fang, out of the way. Ron removed his cape and stood by the hearth, while Hagrid picked his pink umbrella.

His umbrella?

In front of their surprised gazes, the large man aimed at the fireplace, uttered a word, and fire erupted from the umbrella's tip, lighting a

blazing fire in seconds. Magic wasn't what surprised the wizarding children, and Hagrid, registering their presence, quickly hid his umbrella, mumbling something in the lines of "Shouldn't have done that, no, I shouldn't have done that."

Harold smiled. It didn't take a mind-reader to guess what the man was thinking. Hagrid was as subtle as a mother bear. But he was gentle as one, too, and got them tea and cakes. After almost breaking their teeth, they preferred to stay with the tea, surreptitiously putting what remained of their rock-hard cakes in their pockets.

While Ron and his hung cloak were getting warmer and better, the two others discussed with the amiable giant. It seemed that only a few people took the time to do so, and the man was practically babbling his life story. In regard of the man's numerous tasks for Dumbledore, that meant that Harold and Hermione learnt many interesting things. Like the Gringotts break up and why Quirrell died. Well, Harold knew a bit already, but Hagrid's input was another voice confirming several doubts.

Now, why would anyone be interested in a mere stone? Why would the most powerful wizard alive remove said stone from a well-guarded bank vault – just in time, it seemed – and hide it in Hogwarts' depths? And who was Nicholas Flamel? Wait a second... he knew that name!

Geneva. A shop. A wand. His wand, now. Well, one of his.

Nicholas Flamel. One of the few Alchemists who succeeded in creating the Philosopher's Stone. And the owner of the last one. Which had disappeared, it seemed.

Half an hour later, they left Hagrid and returned to the castle for lunch, while the giant resumed his task of setting the tree in the Entrance Hall.

That afternoon, they all started to pack their belongings. In the few months he had passed in school, Harold had made friends with the three other members of the study group's "inner circle", and had learnt that Ron wasn't going home for Christmas, as his parents were

leaving to see his brother Charlie in Romania, and weren't going back before the start of the next term. Right away, and not thinking about it, Harold had offered him to stay at his place. Ron's crestfallen expression had disappeared and he had eagerly accepted, telling Harry that he had to ask his parents first before leaving the room in a hurry. As they had been in the Room of Requirements with Hermione and Tracey at that time, Harold had extended the invitation to them too, and the two muggleborn girls answered that they would see with their parents at the train station. Harold had warned Alison as well, and he knew the young woman would take care of enlarging his parents' house to lodge every possible guest.

After a brief exchange of owls, Ron's parents accepted, informing him that they would still be there at the train platform. After all, the twins were going with Lee already. Percy was the only one staying at Hogwarts during the break, and he had informed them that he was glad to stay to study more. What the red-headed prefect didn't say, though, was his main reason to stay was because Penelope Clearwater, a fourth year Ravenclaw, stayed as well.

On the morning of Monday, December 23rd, the students who weren't staying in Hogwarts got onto the Hogwarts Express for the last time of the year, and headed to London. Harold didn't understand why people living, say, in Aberdeen, had to take the train to the capital, but it seemed such a deep-seated custom of Hogwarts that no one questioned it.

On the long trip there, Harold spent time with the twins and Ron, playing Exploding-drenching-and-generally-dirtying Snap, and learning a bit from the twins. Apparently, their dear Potion professor was staying at Hogwarts, since he had snapped at them once, saying that he'd be better during the incoming two weeks, without brats messing up his potions. Harold tried to check that bit of information but, apparently, the connection to Cassie wasn't usable when he was out of the warded grounds.

How concentrated can you get on a game like Exploding Snap when you close your eyes to check a distant mental connection?

After losing spectacularly, Harold got into the train's bathroom to get the slimy goo off his body, and to cast a quick cleaning spell on his clothes. He bumped into Ron on his way out, and the redhead looked at him in wonder.

"Did you change clothes?"

"No, why?"

"Because they were completely useless and now they are as good as new!"

Harold thought about it for a bit, before smiling. "It's just a little spell Hermione and I found out when you were obsessed with Quidditch practise." He would remember to update Hermione's memory about it later. "Are you interested?"

When Ron's head bobbed up and down, obviously needing the spell right now and perhaps on many more occasions later, Harold smiled.

"Its incantation is Scourgify, and the wand movement is like this." He swished his wand in a particular pattern, which Ron repeated twice before trying on his own person. As he wasn't focused enough, he had to repeat the spell a few times to get rid of all the mess, before smiling gratefully.

"Thanks, mate. This one will be very useful, especially with the twins around. I just hope..."

"Yes?" asked Harold after a few seconds of silence.

Ron blushed. "Nothing, nothing."

Harry looked thoughtful, before speaking again. "Speaking about unkempt furs, where is your hamster? I thought you had one."

The redhead looked at him, blinking, before remembering. "Oh! You mean Scabbers, my rat?"

“Yes, well... rat, hamster, it's not that different.”

“I didn't find him when we packed.” Ron replied. “The damn rat must have fallen asleep in a corner again, or better yet, it has been eaten by Mrs Norris. Or it just died of old age. It's quite rare for a rat to live that long, you know? It was Percy's for as long as I remember but my parents bought him a new owl because he became Prefect and I got the darn rat.” He shook his head. “I never liked it, anyways.”

They both smirked, before heading back to where the twins were. Once there, Harold informed them he wanted to explore the train a bit, to get in touch with his acquaintances from his own House and others.

He greeted Susan and stayed a bit to discuss the incoming holidays with her. When he left, wishing her a happy Christmas, he vowed to find something to owl her in two days. After all, despite their bout over Snape, she was his best friend in Hufflepuff.

At the very end of the train, he noticed that Tracey was in a compartment full of Slytherins, although she was looking through the window pensively. He didn't want to disturb her already unstable status in the serpents' House and left swiftly. After all, he would see her on the platform afterwards.

He also saw Hermione in another compartment, agitatedly discussing with Padma Patil and Amanda Brocklehurst, two Housemates of her. The Patil twin noticed him through the door and prodded Hermione who, upon seeing him, blushed a bit. As their conversation had stopped, he figured it was safe to open the compartment door.

“Sorry. I just passed through the train to wish a Happy Christmas to everyone.”

A silence. Obviously, the conversation the girls had had was very private. He refrained from rifling through Hermione's brain, though. If it was that private, there were chances that he would blush.

“So.” he spoke again. “Happy Christmas, and have a Happy New Year too.”

His greeting was returned after a few seconds, the girls almost whispering. When he left, he couldn't help wondering what all that was about. He forgot about it upon meeting the woman pushing the candy cart on his way back to the twins, and bought an array of sweets for himself, his friends, and his family.

When he arrived in the only train compartment with three redheads in it, he spread the sweets on the seat, motioning to everyone to help themselves. That's when he realized something.

Something disturbing.

Malfoy wasn't on board.

A month before, Harold had asked that Jorg pick him up at the platform, so as not to raise suspicion. Alison had answered, in covert words, that she would be there also, although concealed in some way.

Harold wasn't ready for the sight that greeted him when he disembarked from the train, though. He recognized Jorg at first sight, but not the woman at his side. When he took a cursory glance at both their minds, he suddenly gasped. Either Josh or Alison herself had gone overboard with the glamour charms, and the young woman Alison appeared as was now looking quite older and very different. In fact, she had remembered almost everything about his changed face, and had made it so that she looked like him, darkened skin and all.

He was still in her mind, and he could hear a few words there before her internal laughter shook him off his shock. 'Come greet your mum, you.'

"Mum!" he yelled, and threw himself forward to hug her.

The scene, despite not being true, wasn't the only one around, as the young first years met their parents after almost 4 months of school.

They then proceeded in gathering the four families in one of the Muggle station's waiting rooms. Tracey brought her parents by herself, making sure that they weren't followed by any Slytherins in

the way. Once everyone was in the little room, a round of presentations occurred, after which Alison spoke up.

“Well, it seems that, a few days ago, Harold proposed to his friends to spend several days at our House. As it was on such a short notice, young Hermione and Tracey’s parents haven’t been informed. We wanted to repeat the offer and make sure that we supported it as well.”

In the silence that ensued, Ron’s mother, Molly, stood up. “In our case, we already accepted. Otherwise, Ron wouldn’t be there, as we are going to leave the country for a month. Ron, you are going to act more mature at Harold’s house, you hear me young man? No eating with your hands, and no going to the loo naked.” she finished, looking squarely at her youngest son.

At that point, Ron was beet red of shame, while the other children were part smirking at the quite comical situation, and part anxious that their own parents would repeat the disgracing attitude toward them.

Edward Granger looked at his wife and then at his daughter, before clearing his throat. “In our case, Hermione perhaps told you that we take most of the holidays to travel somewhere, and we had a trip to Savoy planned since August.”

At that, Harold nodded. He had the feeling that the man wasn’t finished.

“ But we have received an invitation for a conference on experimental dentistry, and, well... darling,” the man continued, looking straight at his daughter, “we planned on asking you to stay with Mrs. Damian, you know, your old babysitter.”

Hermione looked ready to burst at this outrage, but Harold held her arm, as her mother continued her father’s talk. “So, you see, we have no problem with you spending a few days with your friends. After Christmas, though. As we didn’t receive much news from you, we want to spend some quality time together with our little girl.”

Despite not being asked for her opinion, the girl thought about it, before nodding. She was blushing about the 'little girl', though.

Harold grinned. "Excellent! What about-"

He was interrupted by his "father" patting his shoulder with his valid arm. "That, dear," said Jorg with an amused glint in his eyes, "is my line, I think."

Harold looked at him in wonder, but he relented. They had a public image to keep, after all. "Okay, dad." and, in the man's mind, he projected a falsely angry comment '...you're lucky I'm in the mood.'

Jorg shuddered for half a second, before catching the witty nature of the answer. He then turned towards Tracey's parents. "Mr and Mrs Davis, the invitation has been extended to your daughter. Do you have other plans for the holidays?"

The addressed couple looked at each other, before answering.

"We planned on spending Christmas together, and go to Grandma for the New Year. You know how she is, Tracey." Selina Davis stated.

The girl nodded, seeming reluctant to accept the decision.

"However," started his father, "there is a whole week in between, during which we both happen to work, unfortunately. You could take a few days off, out of that, to visit your friends. What do you say?"

Tracey was now looking happier than before. She hugged her parents, who then asked Jorg the only question Harry hadn't thought about.

"Do you live far?"

Jorg and the disguised Alison looked at each other. "Yes and no." he answered.

“Clever answer, dad.” said Harold sarcastically.

Alison cleared her throat loudly to prevent the incoming fake row. The others weren't in the secret of Harry's web of relationships, and it wasn't the moment to start leaking their true personalities. “What George wanted to say was that we actually live far, but it's easy to get there through magical means.”

“We live in Switzerland.” stated Harold when the silence obviously meant that they hadn't understood.

“The Swiss Magical Law is less restrictive on portkeys, and we can take you there whenever you want, to return the same.” Alison lied smoothly. Even if it was true, they wouldn't be using that mean of transportation.

Harry then remembered that he hadn't fetched the Grangers and Davis' addresses – he didn't need Ron's since the redhead wasn't returning home for the whole vacation – and he asked them to write them down, at the same time copying their memory of it. It was easier to direct oneself in the gaseous reality by using real memories rather than hand-written instructions.

After agreeing on dates for pick-up and delivery, the four families parted ways, and Harry smiled at Ron. “Ready, mate?”

“As ready as one could be. Why, you think I'm afraid of portkeys? I've already used them, you know. For Quidditch matches and such.”

Harry sensed their surroundings. Nobody else. Good.

“It's a different kind of portkey, Ron.” he said, before motioning to his “parents.”

The two adults grabbed hands with the two boys, so as to make a ring.

And they all disappeared.

At the same time, in Hogwarts' Headmaster's office...

The old man, and supposedly most powerful wizard alive, looked at the vial in front of him. Its crimson content was swirling and made the Headmaster uneasy.

“Are you sure, Severus?” he asked.

“Positive, Headmaster. The potion is quite rare, and it will enhance the spell power. You know the spell already, I think.”

“Yes I do. The World Location Revealer is the most powerful spell usable to locate a person by name, and it gives the caster a precise idea of where in the whole world that person is, as well as that person’s health status.”

“I’m not a student anymore, Headmaster.” Snape huffed. “I don’t need a lesson in a spell I know perfectly well. Know that the potion will enhance your results, giving you his complete address and Apparation hints to get him. That is, if you still want to get the Potter brat here.” he finished, sneering.

Albus Dumbledore sighed. “How many times should I say it, Severus? If we want him in Hogwarts, you shouldn’t use such negative expletives on him, especially as you don’t know him at all. He could be much different from his father.”

“Dogs don’t breed cats, Headmaster. And I’m still asking myself why you want him here.”

“Because his parents would have put him here.” Dumbledore said, turning back to his desk and the vial on it.

A long pause ensued.

“Are you sure that it’s safe?” he asked the Potion Master again.

Said Potion Master scowled, albeit discreetly. “Yes! Do you want to do that in the Hospital wing so that you’ll be tended to, afterwards?”

“No, no.” answered the Headmaster, despite his intuition screaming the contrary. Uncorking the vial, he prepared to do, for the second time of the year, something against his instincts. But he could trust Severus Snape, right?

He downed the potion, and, while it spread in his aged body, chanted the required incantation. A wave of magic exited the Headmaster, quickly spreading in every direction. It left the old man panting and quite exhausted. Albus Dumbledore closed his eyes and waited for his magic to come back with the result. He didn't notice his Potion Master smirking and imbibing another potion.

An hour afterwards, the returning wave came, and centred on the Headmaster. His eyes still closed, the trusting old man waited for the results. He couldn't understand them, though.

Harry Potter was alive and well. He was travelling southwards at the moment. But he was nowhere.

It didn't make sense.

Albus Dumbledore, exhausted because the spell took so much magic out of him, fell into unconsciousness. He didn't even notice that the waves of magic around him, which should have returned into him, went to the Potion Master instead.

A few minutes later, said Potion Master was standing in the back office of a certain Potion classroom.

“So, now that the old muggle-loving fool is out for the count, let's find the office entry.” the man mumbled with an undercurrent of hissing. “The creature's sledge wasn't very clean the last time I found it and it certainly hasn't been washed since then.”

He straightened up. “Reveal yourself.” he hissed in perfect Parseltongue.

And a door shimmered into view. It was black, and adorned with silver snakes around it. The handle was also a snake, fangs protruding ominously. The man knew the step was necessary, though. He grasped the snake-like knob and felt the teeth piercing his skin. It lasted several seconds, more than the last time he had done so, and he was starting to feel his head throbbing, when the door finally opened with a click. Examining his hand, he found no traces of being bitten whatsoever.

It would have been different if he hadn't been deemed worthy to enter Salazar Slytherin's office. In the past, several lucky Potion teachers had found the door by accident, but their luck had stopped right there as most of them hadn't lived more than a few seconds after trying to open it. Those who lived were those who hadn't dared to touch it.

"Great." muttered the man as he crossed the threshold. "Let's find that recipe and be on my way. If that old fool really finds Potter, I'll need the castle's help to monitor him."
Geneva...

The four of them landed in a large room with posh furniture in a warm orange and yellow colour set. Harry looked around, as if searching for something. He had felt observed during the long-distance jump, but the feeling had ended before he could have identified it. He didn't have time to ponder it, though, as three children threw themselves on him at once.

"Harry!" they screamed, while Ron was looking around, astounded. Was he in Switzerland already? And why did these children call him Harry while he couldn't? 'Oh well,' he thought. 'Family has different rights. I wish my mother could refrain from putting me on the spot each time we meet people, though.'

"Jason, Emma, Kathleen! Please leave Harold alone, he had just arrived!" scolded a stern woman, whom Ron thought was the kids' mother. Harry instantly remembered all about his family's real identities and hugged his siblings back.

“But mum,” the boy whined, “it has been so long.” He turned toward Harry and tugged at his sleeve. “Want to see the new computer George and I built?”

“Jason!” said a man who had just entered, using a cane to walk. “Listen to your mother.”

“Sorry, dad, mum.” the addressed boy said meekly. Turning toward Harry again, he whispered “You’ll come?”

At Harry’s nod, the smaller boy stopped clutching him and sat on a sofa next to Jorg, sporting a wide smile.

“Everyone,” started Harold, “this is Ronald Weasley, one of my closest friends at Hogwarts. Ron, here are the people I am the closest to. My family of sorts.”

“Of sorts?”

“Well, do you remember that talk we had on the lake shore? About the sorting Hat?”

“Yes, it wanted to put me in Hufflepuff, but I argued with it until he put me in Gryffindor. All my family has been Gryffindors. I am already the youngest – apart Ginny – and being in Hufflepuff on top of that...”

“What’s wrong in being in Hufflepuff, Ron?” asked Harold with an amused glint in his eyes.

Ron blushed, before shrugging. “We discussed this already, Harold.”

“Right. And, I told you that Hufflepuffs were renowned for their loyalty, remember? And that certain things were better kept hidden.”

Ron nodded, and was going to say something else, when 7-year old Emma – whom Harry remembered as Eva – grasped his leg.

“Hey, mister, why you call him Harold?”

Ron was taken aback for a second. "It's his name, isn't it?"

Kathleen immediately answered in her twin's stead "Perhaps with his ugly head, but we prefer him as Harry."

"Huh, Ron..." started Harry. "It'd be best for you to call me Harry around here."

Ron looked at his friend unsurely, but a sharp nod convinced him he hadn't heard wrongly.

"So, Harry," he said, a bit too forcefully, "what were you saying about hiding things?"

"First of all, Ron, I want you to swear that you won't tell a soul about what you'll be seeing while on this holidays."

Ron looked at everyone around, and everyone was looking back at him with a serious expression, even the kids. 'Where did I land now?' did he ask himself. The only people not looking at him were the little girls and her mother, the latter scolding the former silently.

Silently?

He noticed Alison's wand. What was so important to justify a Silencing spell on a mother scolding a kid? Was it...? He looked back at Harold. No, Harry, now. Could his friend make up his mind?

Ron took a moment to think about his friendship with Harold, and about the chat they had had about Hufflepuff, and concluded that, even if he wasn't sure about the results, his loyalty streak was pushing him to accept Harry's words unconditionally.

He took a deep breath, and spoke. "I, Ronald Bilius Weasley, solemnly swear not to tell anyone, living or dead or in between, about what I'll experience until school starts again."

A silence.

“Wow,” said Harry, “I think it was quite complete.”

“It was.” confirmed Alison, reminding Harry that she had the longest experience of living in the wizarding world.

“Time to drop masks, Alison?”

“Time.”

Ron looked at the two of them. Why did Harry just call his mum by her given name? He looked in shock as Alison’s face quickly melted under the Finite Incantatem spell, revealing a woman in her twenties. Ron’s eyes were wide as saucers. This woman couldn’t be Harry’s mum! He looked at his friend and noticed that his face was melting, too.

The deeply tanned skin cleared, the hair shortened, blackened, and began sticking in places.

“Ron, you will learn Occlumency during this holiday.” the boy said through thinning lips, his voice changing as well. “It’s necessary.”

The redhead looked as the boy he had thought his friend was disclosing himself to him. Even if he didn’t know the reasons behind the masquerade, Ron felt honoured to be included in the circle of people who knew.

Harry’s transformation was finished, now. He was taller, and his face had morphed into a completely different one. Even the eyes were different. They were now green. Emerald green. And they contained far too much wisdom for a kid his age – even if they weren’t Harry’s true eyes: those would really make Ron uncomfortable.

Ron did a double take. He knew that face! He squinted his eyes, trying to remember where it was.

It was at home... in old newspapers... from his sister's room... articles about the Potters... James Potter. There were just the glasses missing.

He looked up, gasping.

“You are... you are...”

“Not quite, Ron. I’m not James Potter.” Harry paused, as realization dawned in his friend’s eyes. “I’m Harry Potter. Nice to meet you.”

Ron fainted.

The next morning...

Ron woke up and found himself in a small bedroom with orange walls and a Quidditch poster.

“What, where?” his eyes scanned the small room until they fell on Harry.

A long pause ensued.

“You remember me, Ron?”

A prudent nod.

“This is my secret, Ron. I don’t want to be seen, heard, or be known as Harry Potter until I’ll find it necessary.”

“Why?”

“For several reasons. What do you think of Harry Potter, Ron? What would you have done, yesterday, if he had walked in on you?”

The redhead thought about it, before answering. “I would have been surprised, I think. Nobody has ever seen him... I mean, you... alive, and, well, there’s also that hero status. I’d have asked for an

autograph, perhaps a picture with the Boy-Who-Lived and his famous..." he looked up, searching. "...scar?"

Harry nodded. "That's why I don't want it. And I'm thankful that my adoptive parents took me to a plastic surgeon to remove the ugly scar. I want to have a perfectly calm education for a change. I already spent many years in a swinging basket."

"What do you mean?"

"I have been chased, Ron. Chased half my life. Around the world and back. I have met people you wouldn't dream about, and others you wouldn't meet even in your nightmares. I want to rest for a change."

He smiled, and the sombre mood dissipated somewhat. "That's also why I'm quite happy to be in Hufflepuff. If the damn Hat had waited before yelling the Voting thing, I'll have argued to be in it. I got lucky, in a way."

Ron snorted. "Only you, Harry. Only you could say he 'got lucky' to be in Hufflepuff. They have such a negative history..."

"Exactly! When I read Hogwarts: A History – and don't make that face, I'm no Hermione – I noticed that Hufflepuff has almost never won the Cup. How can people cope when sorted in it for seven years by a damn Hat? Would you have?"

Ron thought about it for a few seconds, before answering an honest "No."

More seconds passed by, and Harry helped himself to a plate of sandwiches nearby.

"Huh, Harry?" Ron started again.

"Yes?"

"Since your parents are... you know..."

“Dead?”

Ron looked at him with wide eyes again.

“Beware, Ron, your eyes are going to pop out soon.” Harry said before biting into his sandwich in earnest.

Ron looked at him, trying to form a coherent sentence. Harry was munching on the salad-ham sandwich while looking back at him, and Ron had the eerie feeling that Harry could hear his thoughts.

Unexpectedly, Harry nodded, before swallowing his mouthful. “That’s why you need to learn Occlumency, Ron. Your mind is too easy to read. I’m not even trying.”

“You... you can-”

A nod. Ron hadn’t even needed to finish his question.

“And... how...”

“I don’t know, really. No wizard explained magic to me until I met Alison. Well, if you don’t count Bill.”

“Bill? My-”

“Yes. When I said that we moved around the world, it wasn’t figuratively. I met your brother in Egypt, but had to leave quickly because another wizard wanted my hide.”

A pause.

Ron frowned. “You’re annoying when-”

“I’m sorry. I won’t read your mind again.”

“You did it again!”

“Oops.” Harry smiled, before frowning. “Well, I will have to do it again during these holidays, in order to test you. With Snape and all...”

“Snape? What does it have to do with him?”

Harry looked at Ron with a piercing gaze. “He tried to Obliviate me! Have you been in a detention with him yet?”

“Yes! He bloody caught everyone in the classroom.”

Harry nodded thoughtfully. “That’s what I thought.”

“What?”

“He took people in detention to read their minds. He is in search of something, but I don’t know what. And there’s more.”

“More?”

“As McGonagall told us after the troll incident, she spoke about it to the whole school.”

“Yeah, I remember. With Quirrell dying because of the monster rampaging the dungeons and such.”

“Well, that was a lie.”

“A lie?”

“Did you notice blood on the troll club when we were... there?”

“Well... no. I was too occupied levitating... wait a second, here.”

“I’m sorry Ron. Since there were so many mind readers around, I have to alter your memories of that particular incident. Quirrell didn’t die because of the troll, but because of something else.”

“What something else?”

“I don’t know yet, but I would like to ask Dumbledore.”

Ron was thinking back about something Harry had just said. “Hey! Did you just say that you modified my memories?”

“Yes.”

“Without asking?”

Harry raised his hand. “Guilty, your Honour.”

Ron looked ready to burst, before he deflated. “Well, if it’s the famous Harry Potter who did that...”

Harry frowned. “Do you have faith in me, Ron?”

The redhead looked at him absently for several seconds, before nodding.

“I’ll restore your memories when you’ll have learnt Occlumency. You’ll understand why then.”

Ron looked unsure, but he nodded.

Harry munched on his sandwich again, and Ron picked one as well. After several bites, Harry smirked.

“Besides, you aren’t the first to whom I did that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I modified memories of several people, mostly to flee my chasers. And I modified my family’s identity. Their real names aren’t what you heard, but changing it in their mind was easier for them to cope. And no fear of a mind reader picking on them. In this house, the only persons living with their own names are Genevieve, Josh, and Alison.”

“Well, I already met Alison. Who are Josh and Genevieve?”

“Genevieve is the particle physics scientist who helped me patch my mind after an incident involving a complicated and buried muggle appliance 27km wide.”

“Dad would love that.” muttered Ron, while looking at him with wide eyes again. “What did you say?”

Harry smirked. “I swear, Ron, your eyes will pop out soon.”

The addressed boy blinked a few times, and absently brought his hand to his eyes, as if to check Harry’s words. He stopped his move halfway, though, and looked at Harry with a dark look. “Ah ah ah. Very funny. Who’s Josh?”

“He’s Alison boyfriend, a wizard, and a surfer.”

“What’s a surfer?”

“It’s a... hold on.”

Harry was feeling tired of speaking, and merely sent images of people surfing waves into Ron’s mind.

“Whoa!” exclaimed Ron. “Wicked!”

“Surfing or getting the pictures?”

“Both, mate. Both.”

Harry finished his sandwich, while Ron looked absorbed in his new memories.

“Alright, mate. Time to go.”

“Go?” asked Ron.

“Christmas is in two days, remember? I need to shop for gifts and you’re coming with me.”

“Why?”

Harry looked at him with a wide smile. “Because I’d love a present from you. And I’m sure you can find other people to treat.”

Ron wasn’t smiling, though. “You know, Harry...”

“I know.”

“What? You read my mind again?”

“No. I generally refrain from reading the minds of friends and family. Your family’s... ah... lack of funds is a well-known fact in school. And don’t blush or cry or shout, please, I’m not insulting you, just stating a fact. Besides, judging from whatever little knowledge I have of your family, I’d say that you have something else in spades. Something that people like Malfoy would kill to have, if they could admit they were missing it.”

“What is it?” asked Ron, his eyes shining.

“Love.” Harry answered simply. “Now, let’s get started. We do have all day, but I have the feeling it won’t be enough. Here are the rules: you can buy any gift you want. Money will come from me – my parents left me a bit of it before dying – and, as I know you wouldn’t accept it any other way, I tell you right now that it will be put on a tab, to be repaid anytime later. No interest, no fee. Do we agree?”

Ron was too shocked to say anything. He looked at Harry’s proffered hand, and absently shook it.

Harry then morphed his face, and cast a glamour on Ron’s noticeable hair to darken it.

“Let’s get hunting.”

And they did.
Christmas...

“Harry! Oi! Harry! Presents!”

Ron’s shouts could be heard in the whole house, and Harry smirked in his pillow. Some things wouldn’t change, and Ron’s loudness was one of these. It woke the other kids as well, and everyone was soon facing the pile of gifts practically hiding the Christmas tree. With thirteen persons to take care of, five of whom were children, it was guaranteed that it would be. Next to the pile, several other presents were wrapped in a distinctive wizarding paper, with moving items on it: shooting stars, snowmen, and other Christmas-related icons. Some of these presents even moved, quivering slightly, and everybody understood that these were containing magical items. There were several owls resting on the fireplace mantel, a living – although sleeping – proof that some of these came from abroad.

After a lengthy beginning, where everyone looked and admired gifts taken at random in the pile, the laughing free-for-all was inevitable and torn wrapping papers began littering the previously impeccable living room.

Ron and Harry exchanged Quidditch-related gifts, and each of them got cakes from Mrs. Weasley.

Harry got several interesting presents, one of which was a package which obviously contained something alive judging by the sounds and movements coming from it. When opened, it revealed a large hawk. Everyone looked on as it screeched when freed of his confinement. It was a silvery Peregrine Falcon, almost 2 feet in size, and it looked impressive.

“It’s one of the fastest birds of his category.” said Josh softly. “And this one is magical too. I know you had to use school owls, but this bird will outclass them. Have you seen his wingspan? It’s twice his height!”

Harry was silent for a few seconds, before he turned toward Josh, eyes shining in happiness. "Thank you. I'll give him a name, though. 'Bird' sounds definitely too mundane. What about Quicksilver?"

"It's your choice, Harry." said Josh. "However it's a she. Females of this specie are largest than males."

"I still think Quicksilver suits her. What do you think, girl?"

The falcon screeched again, and jumped on his shoulder before anyone could react. Harry winced, but he quickly increased his skin toughness on his shoulders and soon didn't feel anything more than the bird's presence. Josh looked apologetic, though.

"I'm sorry Harry. It must hurt like hell. Don't move, I'll remove it. Come, bird! Come down!"

Harry laughed at the man's antics and Josh looked at him as if he had lost his head. In fact, everybody was looking at Harry at that moment, and it unnerved him a bit.

"Well..." he started. "I guess I do have a tough hide, after all."

"That's for sure!" Jorg joked, and the present unwrapping session took up from where it had stopped.

Several gifts later, Ron went to see Harry with a card in his hand.

"What is it?"

"I don't know." answered Harry innocently. "What does it say?"

"It says "Coupon for a free wand." I don't need a wand, do I?"

Harry looked at his friend inquiringly, before Ron relented.

"Alright, alright. I already told you I had Charlie's old wand. But it's okay, really."

“Ron, do you have any idea how a wand adapted to you would be different from one merely ‘okay’? Look. Here is my Hogwarts wand, which they asked me to buy at Ollivander’s. Lumos.”

A light came from the wand tip, lighting the area around it a bit more. Like a powerful flashlight.

“It’s a good one.” commented Ron. “I don’t even-”

Harry snorted, effectively interrupting his friend. “And here is the same spell with a more adapted wand. Everyone!” he spoke louder, so that everybody could hear him. “Please look somewhere else. Done? Lumos.” he said, using Flamel’s wand. The light encompassed the whole room, leaving no shadows, and it was so bright that nobody could look at it directly. Harry stopped it at once, not wanting to attract undue attention from outside, and spoke again.

“And it’s not even the most adapted wand for me. I never used that one, though. For all I know, it could create a little sun in here.” he continued.

Ron looked at his friend in wonder. “Just... how many wands do you have? And how do you know a wand is adapted to you if you have never used it?”

“Well... let’s say three. And your other question will have an answer soon.”

“Why “let’s say three”? Do you have something else in store?”

Harry frowned. “Let’s just not enter that discussion now, alright?” He started to use his fingers to enumerate. “Wand one, the one I just used. Wand two, the one I fear to use. Wand three, Hogwarts. Gotten from Ollivander’s. Tracked by the British Ministry.”

“What?”

“Wands bought at Ollivander’s are spelled with a tracking spell by the Ministry of Magic. However,” he smiled, “I don’t think they could

track yours efficiently, since it was Charlie's. Thinking about it, you could do magic during the holiday, you know. With Charlie being of age and all..." A pause. "Whatever. You'll have a new one soon, though. Just wait for the others to come."

"The others?"

"I want Hermione and Tracey to have one as well. I had a vis-" he stopped for half a second. "I have a feeling that they could be useful later on."

Several rounds of unwrapping later, Harry was looking at a small stone bowl in wonder, and Alison came behind him to explain.

"This is a pensieve, although the smallest model. It doesn't allow projection, and the number of memories it can contain is quite small. To store the recuperated memories, you'll have to use these tubes." she pointed at a box containing a few dozens tubes with labels and corks. "They are Unbreakable, of course. You can either copy a memory in the pensieve, or displace it. The former could be used to store valuable information like your adoptive parents' true identity. In case you lose your mind again, these would be safe." Harry's eyes started to water at the thought, but Alison, being behind him, didn't notice it and continued. "Displacing memories could prove useful if you have to... how can I say that... "cross enemy lines." Like, if you know you are going to face a powerful Legilimens, you can move your important memories out of your mind, and recover them later."

Harry turned around, and hugged her tightly. "Thank you. Thank you. I'll do it as soon as possible. Can you keep the memories about the identities? You are the most proficient in the art around."

"No problem, bro."

He smiled contentedly.

"Is she your sister, Harry?" asked Ron. "Your family never ceases to amaze me."

“Well, no.” answered Harry, looking at Alison with a grateful eye.
“More like first cousin.”

“Once removed, Harry.” she threatened mockingly.

“Yeah, whatever. She’s like a big sister to me.”

After unwrapping some more, Kathleen found a slim package wrapped in brown paper.

“Harree?” she asked, and her tone of voice brought him quickly, wand drawn.

On the paper, written in a distinguished handwriting he had never seen, was his name.

He took it, and tore the brown paper away. A book emerged from it. A slim although ancient-looking book.

Wand to Staff: an enlightening experience.
by Myrrdin Emrys
Two days afterwards...

Harry hadn’t opened the booklet, afraid it might be a trap. He had put it in a book-preserving sleeve and stored it in his locket. He had seen the booklet author’s wand in the process and supposed that the booklet was made to reach the current owner of Merlin’s wand – after all, he had seen weirder things being done with magic, so... summoning a book? He wanted a better control on his wand waving before trying Merlin’s wand, though.

He had gone to collect Hermione and Tracey and, after the usual explanations about his identity and life, started teaching them Occlumency. It was done in his own way: a tube of aspirin, and copying memories. He not only gave them almost everything he knew about Occlumency and Legilimency, but he also sent them a new language: Tomacheck, the language of the Touaregs. With reason,

he thought that, by using a rarely-used language, they would be able to discuss without their words being understood by eavesdroppers.

Once they all had what was needed, he began to browse their minds, one after the other, never going into the memories themselves, but helping to build the defences. He had suggested his own method of protection, explaining that it was about concealing as well as protecting, and everyone had agreed that it was perhaps the best way to do it.

It would take them time, though, and they made numerous pauses. During one of these, he went with the three of them in Another Road. And their first stop was, as promised, the wand shop. Marig remembered him and greeted him, asking, in covert words, if his wands were up to his expectations. He smiled and answered in not so covert words that yes, they were "outstanding."

The three children, having bought their first wand by trial and error at Ollivander's, looked stunned upon witnessing Marig's spell and its effect. It sure cut the purchase time, and allowed the customer to get the most adapted wand.

In the little store, each of them tried a Light spell with their two wands, and the results were similar to Harry's demonstration, although less impressive. When prodded about it, that evening, Harry would admit that he had bought used wands from already powerful wizards, but he wouldn't elaborate.

After the wand shop, they all headed for the Sports Section, and found that there were more sports in the world than just Quidditch. There even were international events in the like of the muggle Olympic Games – or were the Olympics copied from wizards? Ron found several interesting items, but a look at the prices convinced him to leave quickly. He still bought a small book on Quidditch called *Alternate Strategies to Counter Alternate Strategies*, by Zantine Tortuous. He had browsed the booklet and its content had made him smile. His team wouldn't win by sheer luck anymore, and the Slytherin's usual strategy was going to slap them back in the face.

Their next stop was the local Pets and Supplies shop. Harry couldn't have hidden his hawk even if he had wanted to, and they wanted something as well, at least to communicate with their families. While they browsed the birds, Harry unconsciously hovered toward the snakes. Most of the slithering animals were sleeping, and those who weren't didn't move much either.

"See anything you like?" asked an oily voice nearby. Harry whirled and found himself face-to-face with a small and portly wizard, whose hands were clutching a handkerchief nervously. Every few seconds, the older man would use the cloth to wipe his forehead, never departing from his smile.

"Well, I'd rather you help my friends, over the owls." he stated, before turning back to the snakes.

"My employee is already taking care of them." the man answered. "I seldom see people interested in snakes, and I wanted to..."

"To?"

"To help you choose, of course." the shopkeeper said.

Harry looked at the man intently. Those beady eyes... the sweaty forehead... it wasn't even warm in the shop.

He projected himself in the man's mind, overriding the feeble defences, and checked, in the memory slabs connected to the consciousness by "immediate memory" strands, why the man would really help him.

It wasn't out of kindness.

The man knew that snakes, especially familiars, were mostly sought by evil wizards. He had prepared a good-looking stack of snakes and was waiting for dark wizards to come by. Harry didn't know if there was really that much dark activity in Switzerland, but the man was hoping so, definitely trying to get contacts to one or more dark groups.

Harry spent a long time deciding upon what to do. Half a second, to be precise. Then, as subtly as he could, he wiped any memory or wish of dark activity from the man's mind. Exiting it afterwards, he found himself in front of the man again, who was staring at the snakes quite stupidly.

"Why did I buy those creatures?" he was muttering.

"Can you tell me more about them, sir?" Harry asked.

"Well..." started the man, continuing by a detailed explanation of each of the snakes. "But I don't want them, now." he finished. "I don't even remember why I bought them. I'll make you an offer: you take three cases for the price of one. I'd give them away, but I have to get a little money out of them, you understand."

Harry nodded, looking at the glass cases, which were reinforced by shining metal bars. On the one hand, he wanted snakes. It was something which appealed to him. On the other hand, he knew that these weren't the usual familiars dwelling in Hufflepuff cellar. He could take them home, though, but he would have to let them alone for a long time...

"Are these autonomous?" he asked.

He didn't receive a response immediately and turned around to meet the inquiring gaze of the shopkeeper. "Can I buy the glass case with the snakes in it, and are they self-cleaning and their food supply self-refilling?"

The man understood and nodded. "They sure are self-cleaning. I wouldn't have done otherwise. I'm not going to open these cases, you know. Snakes give me the creeps."

'Sure does,' thought Harry.

The man continued. "However, their food supply must be filled, externally, once a week. Meat, which has to be inserted through that trapdoor, and which will be processed magically."

“Are they bred in captivity? I mean, if I let them out, they can hunt by themselves?”

The man shuddered at the mere thought, but reflected about it, before nodding. It was all Harry needed. He would see with his family, though. In fact, as he only had to effectively see them once a month, he could hide them in his trunk...

...if it was large enough. He swore internally. He should have bought the enlarged trunk from the start. He knew how to enlarge and reduce things, though, and would still be able to use the trunk, but trunks already made enlarged were less prone to react badly to a Finite Incantatem. Now that he thought about it, he really wanted another trunk, in which he could hide large things, and even himself. Looking back at his friends, still discussing over the avian creatures with the shopkeeper's assistant, he made up his mind and turned toward the serpents again.

One of the cases had seemed empty, but the man had explained about them. They were the result of magically-controlled breeding, resulting in apparently highly intelligent snakes, very slim, and displaying silvery-like light grey scales. They were also able to sleep in unusual positions, and Harry had thought that they were straight lines of metal.

When he looked around for a second case, Harry noticed a large reticulated python. It wasn't moving much, merely sensing his surroundings with his tongue. Harry got a flashback of himself scanning his surroundings mentally, and decided to buy the snake on the spot. It was a young one, the shopkeeper was babbling, and it could grow. After all, apart magical and magically-enhanced beasts, pythons were renowned to be the longest snakes in the world, reaching 30 feet.

As he could take a third one for free, he looked around, and his gaze passed over the only specimen able to eat snakes. The King Cobra's diet was mainly snakes, but the shopkeeper had assured that the protecting cases processed the food so that the snakes inhabiting them would find it to their taste. The King Cobra's bite was also highly

venomous, and it was able to stand on its tail before attacking. Once again, it was a young specimen, and Harry learnt that it would grow to a length comprised between 10 and 20 feet.

Extracting his wand, Harry shrunk the three cases – a useful spell he learnt from Alison along with the appropriate enlargement and feather-light ones, a long time ago – and pocketed them, before following the man to the counter to pay for them.

This done, he returned to his friends, who were discussing of the compared merits of the bird species relative to mail distribution and eating habits. So far, Hermione was defending owls, while Ron wanted something larger, like an eagle. Tracey wasn't defending anything, as she preferred direct contact to mail, something which had caused her German grandmother to label her as schreibfaul – lazy to write. She had her bit to say about each choice, however.

Harry smiled. "Hey guys, no need to argue. You take what you want. It's my Christmas present for my closest friends."

Ron's face was red in confusion, and he started to say "Mate, I already got-"

"I know, Ron." he answered, not even needing to read the other boy's mind to guess how the sentence would have ended. "Consider it an allowance for our little club, then. I don't want its members to miss each other just because they live in separate Houses."

"Our club, Harry?" asked Tracey.

"Our club." he nodded, and they understood that the "inter-house study group" was going to be something more important.

"We need a name, then." stated Hermione.

Harry smiled. "Sure. In the meantime, why don't you choose a messenger bird?"

“But, Harry,” said Tracey, “how can we stay secret when owls come over the Great Hall each morning?”

“I learnt about something in Hogwarts: A History.” Harry started, before rolling his eyes at their antics. Ron was expressing his annoyance with the exact same facial expression; Hermione was looking overly interested; and Tracey was looking... as herself.

‘She must have learnt how to hide her thoughts from showing on her face,’ Harry thought. ‘That will make her a really good Occlumens soon. Each of them will be, as they duplicated and buried half their mind already.’

He shook himself out of his reverie, and returned to the subject at hand. “I learnt that inside mail will travel immediately. Classrooms are off limits, of course, but the owls will be able to find someone as soon as it is possible. If you want to use extra comments for the mail delivery, though, be sure to buy an A-class owl. Or... eagle.” he finished, seeing Ron’s disgruntled look.

“What’s an A-class owl?” asked Hermione, always seeking information.

“It’s more intelligent than regular mail owls, which are already more intelligent than non-magical ones. It can understand things like “be sure that Ron is alone before delivering this.” and the like. I think there’s a way to charm any bird to do it, though, although it’s more complicated than just buying one.”

A short pause ensued, broken by the returning sales assistant – the young man had left the bickering young customers the moment Harry had arrived. “Do you need more assistance?”

Harry looked at his friends, and they all nodded, before launching into a detailed description of what they wanted.

An hour later, they exited the Pet shop, quite proud of their birds. Hermione was holding cage housing a regal-looking brown horned owl, which she christened Athina.

Tracey had got her own falcon, of the *Herpetotheres cachinnans* species. With its 15 inches, it was quite small, but the assistant had assured her that it was at least as fast as a regular mail owl, and Harry had made sure he was knowledgeable and honest. However, what had initially drawn her to that particular bird wasn't anything relative to speed, beauty, or intelligence. It was its feeding habits: it was almost exclusively eating snakes. She figured that it was the proper bird to innocently display her anti-Slytherin tendencies, and she named it Wotan, the Old German name of the Norse god of hunting.

Ron had got the only eagle the shop had, a brownish wedge-tailed Arrawa. The ruddy bird – in almost all the senses of the term, as it wasn't made of metal – was flapping his large 1-yard long wings dangerously, eager to take the air. Harry had noticed the bird's agitated state, and had suggested to Ron that he should take another bird, or at least wait until they found another one, but the boy had been adamant. An eagle he wanted, an eagle he would get.

"You'd better name it, Ron, before he flees." said Harry, his eyes dancing with mirth.

"Easier said – ouch – than done!"

Hermione and Tracey looked at each other, smiling, before the latter spoke. "I suggest Rudy."

"Alright! Rudy it is." uttered Ron, before releasing the large bird. "I never thought those birds were so heavy." he said, turning around and massaging his shoulder. He then noticed his friends' looks. "What?"

"Nothing. You just named your ruddy bird Rudy." said Harry, before laughing outright, quickly joined by the girls. Ron's disgruntled expression furthered their hilarity, and, after several seconds, the red-headed boy realized his predicament and joined his friends in laughter.

After calming themselves, the four of them walked away, and, at the first recess, they followed Harry as he Apparated home.

Once there, and before starting another of their Occlumency sessions, the four friends went to their rooms to settle their birds, and, in Harry's case, his snakes too. He didn't want them eaten by Tracey's raptor. Fetching the reduced snake cases from his pockets, he went through his possessions to find them a place to stay. None came immediately to mind, and he just stored them on top of his wardrobe.

After the mind-burying session, Harry took a bit of beef from the fridge, and went back to his rooms to feed his snakes. He fed the venomous snake first, inserting the read meat in the slot, before doing the same for the small ones, then the python. When that last animal saw the meat landing in front of him, though, it lifted his head toward him, and his tongue darted out, as if to feel him.

"Thsssk ysss, hsssmsssn."

Harry jumped as the voice reached him. What was that? It was faint, and had an echo to it, as if coming from a closed room. He looked around, and found nothing except... the snake? He shrugged and closed the trapdoor. The python must have been hissing and he must have thought he understood something. Said python looked at him through the glass for a few seconds, tongue darting in and out of his lipless mouth, before going to the meat.

That night, Harry experienced a strange dream, involving serpents and birds, as well as a plane plunged in darkness. When he woke up, in the early hours of the next day, the only thing he could remember of it was an unfathomable sentence.

"Get glasses for the king of snakes."
Hogwarts' Headmaster office, a week later...

"Are you sure, Albus?" asked Minerva McGonagall. "In your state..."

“I’m aware that I lost quite a bit of power, but I’m not diminished!” Dumbledore answered agitatedly. “I’ll go there. I need Harry here!”

“Don’t you move, sir, if you please.” said a woman in front of them. “I’m not quite finished and these sleeves are a little tricky.”

A long pause followed, during which the Headmaster was finishing being dressed up.

It was a strange sight to behold, as the supposedly most powerful wizard in the "Wizarding World" – which didn’t encompass the whole planet, as Dumbledore remembered himself for the umpteenth time of the day – was standing on a stool and the official tailor of the wizarding world of Britain, Madam Malkin herself, was adjusting his outfit on him.

The Chinese wizarding society, which Dumbledore had studied without having been allowed to enter it a century ago, was very strict about their garments. They had to depict the wearer’s status, power, and achievements. And, in the case of Hogwarts’ Headmaster, it was quite a bit.

“You still haven’t told me why we need him here, Headmaster. After all, he’s not dead, and, well...”

Albus Dumbledore turned his head suddenly and stared at her with an annoyed expression, before looking down pointedly at the tailor working at his sleeve. McGonagall understood the hidden meaning. The man wouldn’t answer until they were alone. But she also guessed that she wouldn’t have a full answer either: the old man had always refused to answer that particular question. She was right, of course, but that didn’t give her any clue about his reasons.

Once the Headmaster’s robes were finished, he stepped down from his stool, looked at his reflection on the full-length mirror, and nodded. Madam Malkin left the room soon after, knowing that she would be paid later through Hogwarts’ usual monthly payroll.

He then straightened up, and, grasping his wand in both hands and bowing like he had learnt to do so long ago, he whispered "Wish me luck, Minerva."

"Good luck, Albus."

"Thank you." he answered, before throwing a handful of Floo powder in the fireplace, yelling "The Leaky Cauldron." From there, he could Apparate anywhere.

Several jumps later, he found himself at the wizards' gate of the Forbidden Palace, in China. He didn't know much about the country, except that their magical governing body was situated there. He knocked, three times, and a short and bald man opened the bull's-eye, rapidly speaking something in Chinese.

"I'm sorry." said the old professor. Unlike most British wizards, Albus Dumbledore knew several wizards in the higher circles of their reclusive society. Of course, one would argue that it was only thanks to his advanced age. He supposed that one of them could have a high enough position to help him. "I don't speak your language. Can I see the Chamberlain Aixinjueluo?"

The guard looked at him with wide eyes, before slamming the little door. Dumbledore waited for five minutes, before deciding to knock again. Before his hand made contact with the wooden door, though, the bull's-eye opened again, and another man appeared, taller, and more muscular as well. The man had to bend down to look through the hole, and Dumbledore noticed that the man's beard was littered with meal remains.

"What yeh want?"

Dumbledore thought about it for a moment, before answering.

"I am Albus Dumbledore. I make the humble request of being shown to the Chamberlain Aixinjueluo."

He knew that the concept of presenting himself was redundant with his attire and the "humble" request wasn't, but in his recollection of wizarding China, it was necessary to at least continue the conversation.

"Why then?" the brute replied, clearly upset at having had his lunch interrupted.

"It is for a private problem. Is he available?" Dumbledore asked, pushing his luck a little bit.

In fact, the elderly man was getting borderline impatient. After all, he could always cast spells in the middle of a street to attract attention. The guard wasn't fazed by Dumbledore's attire, though. He wiped his beard silently, while looking at the occidental wizard for a full minute. Then, just as Dumbledore felt he was going to shut him off, the door clicked open.

He crossed the large doorway and noticed that the man, now standing straight, was easily over Hagrid's size and weight.

"Yeh follow." the giant said, before heading toward the Palace itself. The great building was the same one the muggles knew about, but Dumbledore immediately noticed numerous targeted notice-me-not charms over doors, people, and miscellaneous items.

They entered the main building and the man navigated through the corridors, before meeting two men in uniform, obviously standing guard – despite the fact that they were in the middle of an otherwise empty corridor. The giant guard bowed until his head was lower than the others', something which seemed difficult to do, and uttered several words in a rapid although halting Chinese. One of the guards haughtily looked over toward Dumbledore, who bowed as well. In that posture, though, the old man missed the guards' surprised gaze.

Once he was back upright, the same guard motioned him to follow, and began to walk away briskly. Catching up with difficulty, Dumbledore began to pant, inwardly cursing his heavy garment. He was just asking himself how many corridors he was going to run in,

before stopping abruptly beside a door, through which the guard went without knocking. He hesitantly followed, and saw the man discussing with a young woman. The room was small, and decorated with several frames of dragons. There was a desk, a row of comfortable-looking chairs near a small table, and another door.

It was a waiting room.

After a quick and whispered conversation, the guard left, and the woman looked at him. Visibly impressed by his résumé – after all, it was displayed on his robes for the world to see – she indicated the chairs. He sat, and soon after, was offered a fuming cup of tea. He thanked her, but got the feeling that she was deaf, as she didn't react.

After sipping the strong tea, he waited for a very long time, while the young woman was sitting at her desk. The sun was getting lower in the sky, and the old man was wondering if he should head back to find a place to rest, when the other door opened, and three men entered. Despite the fact that he had stood, they hadn't noticed him, and were continuing their conversation. They were all Chinese but, to his surprise, were dressed like occidental businessmen.

After a moment, two of them left and the third returned through the door he had come from. The young woman, who had stood up when they had entered, picked a small notebook and followed him, and Albus Dumbledore was left alone.

He was considering sitting down again, and was halfway through the move when the same door opened again.

“Mr Dumbledore?” asked a male voice, sounding cultured, and with only a slight accent.

He straightened up immediately, and bowed at the man before him. “I happen to be him.”

“No need for such formalities, now, Mr Dumbledore.” He smiled. “Nowadays, few people display their achievements on themselves, especially since you visibly lived a long and fruitful life.”

The old man felt himself blush. If only he hadn't been focussing on what happened in Britain, he would have known. Speaking of which...

"I didn't know," he answered. "My last contact with China dates back more than a century ago. I asked for him at the door, but I actually don't know what he became."

The man smiled again, and motioned him forward, into his office, where the young woman was still there, standing. It was a large room, with a wide window overlooking a bamboo-planted garden. The grand desk was littered with papers, pencils, and general office tools. Albus Dumbledore felt as out of place as a muggle would be in his Headmaster office. The man sat on his own chair and indicated a chair before speaking again.

"You are speaking about the Chamberlain Aixinjueluo, I have been told."

"You were told well."

"My great-grandfather had this position, yes. I am Chen Shui-Wang, Undersecretary for Muggle relationships." He shrugged. "It's merely about controlling them than communicating, though."

Dumbledore looked nonplussed at having been directed to a "mere" undersecretary, and his stance was easily read by his interlocutor.

"Don't be disappointed at having been directed at me. My position is the only one requiring a contact with the muggles and I have been duty-bound to learn many foreign languages in the process. The whole rest of the wizarding government of China only speaks Chinese. They only deal with Chinese people, after all."

A short pause followed, before Dumbledore put the conversation back on its track.

"You said that your ancestor had the Chamberlain position. Shall I conclude he passed away?"

Shui-Wang smiled again. "In fact, you shall not. But he's not Chamberlain anymore. I doubt that you'd be able to see him, though."

"Why so?"

"He is one of the closest advisors of our Emperor. The usual waiting queue to see one of them is currently..." he frowned, before nodding, "3-year long."

Albus Dumbledore had known about the Emperor when he had been in China before, but that was so many years ago that he didn't know how things had changed. His blank look compelled the young man to continue.

"You see, China has always had an Emperor, even when the muggles thought him finished. He simply retired in the Forbidden Palace, from where he rules the wizarding world – I mean, our wizarding world: China. He is the wisest man, but the worldly affairs require that he surrounds himself with counsellors, like my dear ancestor. My great-grandfather is..." he looked at Dumbledore and smirked, "quite old, but the Emperor is even older. It is rumoured that he is the only man to have brewed the Great Elixir of Immortality, as he is rumoured to have lived more than a millennium, changing names as he progressed in his life."

A pause followed, during which Dumbledore calmly processed this new data, while the man sipped his tea.

"Now that you know this, can you tell me why you came here?" asked the Undersecretary, still holding his cup.

Dumbledore hesitated, before answering. "I'm searching for someone."

"Don't we all..." muttered the man.

The visiting old man blushed, but he quickly recovered. "I just meant that there is a young boy who is missing, and we have to find him."

“Why?” asked Shui-Wang, putting the cup back on the desk before leaning forward and stapling his fingers in a gesture of attention.

‘There it goes.’ thought the old man. ‘It passes or it fails... I really should stop thinking in academic terms.’

“You see, his name is Harry Potter, and we’ve been without news about him since... a long time ago, actually.”

A brief glint had passed through the man’s eyes at the mention of the boy’s name, and Dumbledore could have sworn it was recognition. He continued through his tale, though.

“We have no clue about where he is. I recently used a very powerful spell to locate him, without result.”

“Is he dead?”

“No. The spell I’m talking about also gives insight about his health. He’s very well.”

“So, why do you want him back?”

“Well...” Dumbledore was getting uncomfortable. Not only was the Undersecretary pushing the conversation into directions he didn’t want to follow, but he was also completely impervious to light Legilimency. His usual eye twinkle, generally able to extract surface thoughts from the people talking to him, was useless. He suspected that, even if he drew his wand to cast the real charm on the man, it would be difficult as well. On top of that, he had been relying so much on his eye thingamajig that he had a hard time interpreting the other man’s expressions. He wasn’t even sure they were genuine either.

“Do you know the situation in Britain?” he asked suddenly.

“About what?” the Chinese man asked back.

“Harry Potter defeated one of the deadliest Dark Lords in History...” seeing the annoyed gaze sent his way, he corrected himself quickly. Old habits die hard. “...British History. The boy defeated him while he was only one year old, but his parents died.”

Shui-Wang nodded once, but didn't elaborate, and Dumbledore was left to ponder if he had to continue the story or not. He decided to.

“I put the boy into his aunt's care, and got no news from him or the Dursleys since then. When it was time to start the boy's magical education, we couldn't reach him. After some research, we found out that his relatives had left for America, and from there, they went to China.”

“How long, between leaving the boy and finding him absent?”

“Ten years.”

“I know about Britain magical education.” said the man, looking through the window absently. “After all, I have a distant cousin in your school. I'm still wondering why you wait so long to bring them to school, however.”

“Ah yes? Who?”

“Cho Chang. Her British mother didn't trust our schools and sent her to her alma mater.”

Another embarrassed silence occurred, before Dumbledore answered the previous question

“Well, the school has been set that way by its Founders. I know it has to do with the children developing better control over magic at this age.”

“How long have you been employed at Hogwarts, Headmaster Dumbledore? Have you visited other schools?” as Dumbledore was opening his mouth to answer, the Chinese man added “...and I don't

speak of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang which, as you sure know, were built by Hogwarts alumni thus following the same code.”

Dumbledore performed a quick computation, before answering. “I guess I’ve been either teaching or managing the school for around 140 years, now. But, except the two you mentioned, I’ve never visited the other schools.”

“Congratulations for your long service to the school.” said the man. “However, you should visit our schools some time in the near future.”

“What do you mean?”

The Undersecretary looked at him with a piercing gaze, and Dumbledore suddenly wondered if the man was able to read his surface thoughts. After all, he was a good Legilimens, but a moderate Occlumens. Lack of practice, surely. After all, after 140 years in the same setting, one tends to get lazy with something.

“Tell me.” said Shui-Wang, interrupting his thoughts. “What happens in the life of a muggle-raised wizard, before entering your school? Magically, I mean.”

“Well...” Dumbledore reflected about it, while wondering about the question. “They display accidental magic at random stages, but that’s quite all.”

“So, you mean to say that there is no one to inform that wizard – or witch – about their talent before they are 11?”

Dumbledore wished he could leave. But the man was the only person able to help him at the moment, and he continued to answer.

“Well... yes, that’s pretty much it.”

“ And, hypothetically speaking, what would happen if an extraordinary gifted child displays a rare control over his magic? Is your system designed to take that into account?”

“It’s generally reported by the parents, who-”

“I think I said muggle-raised.”

Dumbledore thought about it again, and answered “In all honesty, no.”

The Undersecretary stood up, and started pacing. Despite the schism between China’s official governing body and the rest of the world, his position had allowed him to realize that there were interesting ideas from both sides, and he wanted to prove his point to the aged wizard.

“Let me elaborate, and stop me if I’m wrong.” He said, and Dumbledore nodded. “Said hypothetical child could display accidental magic until the age of... let’s say 5 years old, and he – or she – could be able to start controlling it, learning alone, without any form of external control because no one around them is a wizard. And, depending on how they are being raised, they could display unusual altruism... or selfishness. Is that reasoning sound?”

Dumbledore reluctantly nodded.

“Now... still hypothetically speaking, if I were to establish a show touring the country, with posters charmed to attract magically able children, I’d be able to locate them, and then enrol them in some kind of activity to keep their magic in check.”

Dumbledore nodded again, but he was still not understanding where all this was heading.

“And then... you wouldn’t have had a raging Voldemort on your hands.” the man finished, dropping the bomb.

“What?”

“Not only that, but that Harry Potter character would have been properly educated too.”

“Whatever do you mean?” demanded the Headmaster, who had stood up in the middle of Shui-Wang’s last sentence.

The man looked at him, before sighing. “I don’t know what to say. My duty forbids me to tell you about our school system and other magical facilities, and you’ll have to remember what I already told you.”

He sat down heavily, put his feet on the desk, and smiled. “Now, let me tell you an interesting story, which I won’t repeat. On August, 3 years ago, a family arrived in a large Chinese town. Their house had been bought and furnished before their arrival, and the man had a job waiting for him at the local factory. They all thought they had moved because of that job. However, by interrogating one of the remaining ones on site, we recently discovered that the people who had helped them had a secondary motive. A motive whom I got the name from your own mouth today. Harry Potter.”

“What do you mean? Can I see the person you interrogated?”

The Chinese man raised his hand. “That man has been Obliviated, and I’ll finish my story before answering more questions. These people, who belong to one of the numerous so-called secret agencies of the muggle United States of America, had moved the family in a house full of cameras so as to observe their target quietly. Said target didn’t give them what they wanted, though. And, more than that, young Harry Potter unexpectedly escaped their watch.”

Dumbledore looked ready to ask a question, but Shui-Wang continued, not even looking up from his folded hands.

“The boy got enrolled in one of our martial art schools, and the... people we talk about, the secret agents... they weren’t allowed inside the monastery during the 2-month intensive term.”

“What did he learn?”

“I don’t know. His instructors were very brief on his record. He was said to protect his little brother, and he finished second of the ending tournament. However, I personally know one of the monks and went

there to check about the case before closing it, and he told me several interesting things.

“The school’s policy is to allow bullies to exist, because they are part of life. It seems that Harry wasn’t fond of them, and several known troublemakers left the training grounds without explanations.”

“So?”

“It always happened after they targeted Harry’s brother.”

A stunned pause.

“That old monk also told me that, on the usual exercise with clay tiles, Harry practically vaporized them, ending inside the stone underneath.”

“What do you mean?”

The man looked at him with intense eyes. “I mean to say that, in this exercise where only few students succeed in breaking one, Harry Potter, at the age of 9 and with one bare hand, crushed 19 clay tiles and his fist broke through the stone floor. Unharmful. A destructive power unheard of. Do you understand what I said about controlling gifted children, now? If Harry Potter had been able to destroy your Dark Lord at one, guess what he’s currently capable of.”

A very long pause ensued, while the woman came to refill their cups of tea. When Dumbledore spoke again, it was in a faint whisper.

“It has been two times I failed at reaching him, already, and I can’t prevent from wondering... why do people keep saying that young Harry has a brother?”

“Ah. Had forgetfulness got hold of me already?” he asked, smirking, before becoming serious again. “I thought you knew it.”

“What?” the Headmaster couldn’t help feeling stupid with all his questions.

“If their arrival papers were correct – and I checked – the Dursleys have adopted Harry. In fact, before today, I wondered how a young boy named Harry Dursley could attract secret agents from the other side of the world, as well as display such a destructive rage. I understand a bit better, now.”

“And you said he finished only second of the tournament? How comes?”

The Undersecretary shrugged. “I don’t know. The old monk only said that the winner’s fighting skill wasn’t up to his adversaries, but he always seemed to beat them nonetheless because they froze at one moment or another. He even said that this Malfu person hadn’t integrated the essence of the Shaolin spirit.”

Dumbledore had a dreading feeling at the bottom of his stomach. “You... you don’t mean Malfoy, do you?”

The man looked at him, surprised. He then seemed to concentrate on something. “You know what? You might be right. I suppose that the monk mispronounced the name.”

Albus Dumbledore sat back, stunned. These were too many revelations. After another long pause, he looked up toward Shui-Wang, who was signing official-looking papers.

“What... where are they, now?” he enquired.

“I don’t know.” the man answered, not looking up. “They left the country right after that tournament. And, before you ask, all we know is that they took a plane to Nice.”

“Neass?”

“Nice, in France.”

Dumbledore stood up, quivering. Internally, he cursed the Founders for leaving behind such a rigid code about Hogwarts. He quickly

realized that it was also his fault for not having anticipated this. He could have build primary schools for magically-talented children. After all, the purebloods were raised magically, and he was disserving his reputation of "muggle-loving" by not giving the muggle-raised wizards and witches an introduction to magic. Tom Riddle had obviously trained himself in the art of deceiving and treachery. He just hoped that Harry Potter wasn't following the same path.

"Do you have other questions?" asked the Undersecretary, still signing a rapidly declining stack of papers.

"Well... no. You have my gratitude for all the information you provided me with. I don't know how I can thank you."

The man looked up, and smiled, a twinkle of his own in the eyes. Having lived beside a large number of troublemakers, Dumbledore immediately recognized the signs of imminent mischief. He couldn't back away just now, though.

"I just had the perfect idea." Shui-Wang was saying. "Why don't you come eat with me? I will pay for it, but your presence alone should be enough to help me further the signature of an important contract."

Dumbledore wasn't looking very sure of himself. He knew Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Beans. He knew the muggle Chinese cuisine. He just wasn't sure he wanted to taste a mix between the two. He had a new lead, though, and it allowed for a little sacrifice. When he made his last jump, Apparating in an isolated shop in Diagon Alley and directly using the Floo access there in order to reach his office faster, the aged Headmaster was not only panting. He was red-faced, bordering on a not-so-nice shade of purple. For the twenty-third time of the evening, he coughed. And, for the nineteenth time, he removed his hand just in time as a jet of flames erupted from his throat – yes, he got burnt a few times.

"Merlin, Albus! What happened? Were you attacked? Have you-"

The old man raised a trembling hand, effectively stopping McGonagall's frantic exclamations.

“I’m fine.” he wheezed, before sitting in his favourite chair. He coughed again, and a pile of paper in front of him was transformed in a pile of ashes in moments.

“I hope it wasn’t important.” he whispered, barely able to speak louder in fear of coughing. He didn’t want to transform his whole office in a pile of smouldering rubble.

The Deputy Headmistress looked at him sternly before sighing. “What happened, then?”

Dumbledore was rummaging through his drawers, and absently extracted a pendant before remembering that he wasn’t alone. Pocketing it, he took two vials of potion and gulped them in quick succession.

His exertion and breathing problem taken care of, he was able to answer her question, explaining everything to her. Especially the meal.

Chen Shui-Wang had taken him to his own house, and presented him to his beautiful wife, before heading to the restaurant, specialized in traditional Sichuan cuisine, with wizarding add-ons. Even before the food arrived, Dumbledore knew he would have a problem. The menu was in Chinese, and none of his spells could overcome this in just a second. Bending towards his host, he just told him he’d have the same as he would. The man had smiled knowingly, and the rest of the evening had been pure torture.

They had started with some Fuqi Feipian, thin slices of beef lung coated in numerous spices, and the numbness that invaded Dumbledore’s mouth afterwards prevented him from speaking his refusal of the other dishes. His numbness was quickly dissipated, though, when he imbibed a magical version of Zhuye Qingjiu. The green bamboo-based drink was strong and was getting to his head, but at least, he could eat again.

The next serving, at least, was accompanied with plain rice as a side order. Otherwise, the Mapo Doufu pork and Kung Pao chicken would have made an explosive substance in his stomach. After giving a dignified try at eating with sticks, Dumbledore resolved to eating with his fingers like most of the restaurant's clientele.

He nodded along his host's explanations of each dish – after he ate some of it, of course – and involuntarily played the naïve in a game of which he ignored everything, even the language.

When the waiters cleared the last plates and presented the dessert, he was quite pleased that the bowl of fruits-topped Douhua was quite plain. Not having had his full with the mere bites he had taken from the main course, he took another of the proffered desserts too. The Azuji bean cakes didn't seem to have an effect on the other guests, and Dumbledore ate one. It was quite thick, though, and he needed something to drink. His host was entertaining his friends in Chinese, and sitting nearby was a bottle of water, which he grasped. Filling his glass, he downed it in one go.

It wasn't water, though.

It was Baijiu, one of the most potent alcohols in the world. And, more than that, this one was charmed. He coughed most of his glass out, and the most unexpected thing happened. He breathed fire.

The napkin took fire. Some clothes took fire, too. Only the experienced waiters' deft reaction prevented the remaining bottle from exploding and the fire from spreading. The old man continued to cough, though, expelling fire each time. After a quick discussion, the waiters brought him a glass of Meigui Lujiu, another alcohol, this one with roses and sugar. Shui-Wang translated the desperate waiters' words and he understood it was laced with some kind of a healing potion. He downed it as well, and the coughing fit subsided a bit.

After taking their leave, Dumbledore and Shui-Wang went back to the Undersecretary's home. On the way, the Chinese man asked for the aged Headmaster's forgiveness, and received it, alongside a jet of flames he barely escaped. Dumbledore was quite happy, despite his dragged state, because the whole day had been full of surprises,

something which, at his age, was quite rare. And he was more than a little inebriated as well.

To be continued in next chapter: Back to Front and Vice-Versa...

What is it with the teacher?
Has he healed or is he tough?
And, lastly, the big matter:
Was the meal spicy enough?

Chapter 12 – Back to Front and Vice-Versa
posted September 4th, 2005

Knock, knock.

“Enter.” the man shouted.

The door opened and the boy entered. Outside of this room, he was as always, classy and strutting, but he had learnt something while in detention with the man. And he was now completely submissive.

“I brought the things you asked me, my lo-”

“Shush! What did I tell you about titles!” snapped the man.

“I’m sorry, mast... sir.”

“You’d better be. Remember that titles aren’t to be used in Hogwarts. Only at my house.”

“I’ll remember, sir. I got carried away.”

The man smirked. “Like father, like son, it seems.”

“You saw my father recently?” the boy looked up with something like fear in his eyes.

“We can say that he was less than pleased to see me in that particular shape. But he understood, as did the others. Enough talking, now. Put the diary on the cupboard.”

The young boy, barely a teenager, put said book on the low cupboard containing all the ingredients for the students’ potions. As he was moving back to his place in front of the man, he inadvertently kicked a desk near him.

“Pay attention!” the man lashed out, before straightening up. “Come here, now. Did you have any problem finding the rat?”

“No. It seems that the weasel forgot about it, or lost it before leaving.”

The boy got a small matchbox-like package from his pocket, before enlarging it. It expanded into a steel cage with a rodent inside.

“Good.” the man seemed quite interested, if not outright gleeful. “The little critter couldn’t lose itself in Hogwarts, now could it?”

The boy didn’t answer, and placed the cage onto a nearby table before approaching.

After a moment, the man spoke up again. “It’s time.” he said. “Proceed with the ingredient.”

Trembling, the blond boy took a small box from his heart pocket and went to the simmering cauldron which the man was already stirring with a silver spoon.

Opening the small box on top of the cauldron, he waited for the man’s nod and upended the box. A rainbow-coloured powder fell on the simmering solution, which began to bubble. It was a beautiful sight to behold, and the young boy was transfixed by it. Crushed fairy wings could have that effect on people not used to them. The man wasn’t looking, though, his eyes darting between the recipe and the cauldron. He didn’t see the boy’s dreamy face, nor did he see his hand relaxing...

Splash!

The man’s head turned so fast that his vertebrae cracked and he stayed blocked. He quickly used a bit of his wandless magic to force his neck back to his position. It would hurt for weeks, but he had more immediate preoccupations.

The boy was jolted out of his reverie, as the little metal box he had been holding fell in the cauldron, splashing the coloured liquid onto his face.

He screamed and stumbled back, clawing at his burnt face, until his head hit the wall, knocking him out.

The unusual potion, at that time, was highly corrosive, and other unknown properties could be expected. The boy had been splashed on the right side of his face, and the potion covered a triangular area between his cheeks, his ear, and his forehead, including his eye. This area was slowly being eaten away with an ominous hissing sound, only to be replaced by... silver?

The man couldn't do anything about it, though. The box splashing in the cauldron was already a disaster in itself, and he didn't want to take more chances with the potion. After two weeks, he was only halfway through its brewing and, if he stopped stirring now, it would go to waste. Brushing the sweat off his forehead, the Potion Master continued his work.

Draco stayed unconscious the whole time. It didn't seem to disturb Snape, though.

In a large room full of people...

“Happy new year!” everybody yelled.

Harry had Apparated with Tracey the afternoon before, depositing her and her luggage at her home. He hadn't stayed, and Tracey, after changing clothes, had accompanied her parents to the New Year feast that Mathilda Werner, her great-grandmother, was giving.

The room was full of happy people. Said great-grandmother had had four children, who in turn got her 13 grandchildren. Tracey was the firstborn of the great-grandchildren, and several years separated her from either her cousins or her parents' siblings. As it was, despite being pleased with the setting, the young girl wasn't really having fun.

“Hey there, little niece! Or should I say tall niece? You sure grew since I last saw you. Stop before you hit the ceiling, will you?” joked her uncle Albert, one of the few she generally opened up to. “I heard you are in a boarding school, now. Having fun?”

Tonight, though, she wasn't really talkative. Only a few days separated her from her return in the accursed dungeons. If she had known being ambitious meant living with bigoted purebloods, she would have learnt Occlumency before. Or at last tried to argue with the Hat, like Ron.

She was now accomplished in the art of hiding her feelings, though, and her only answer was a shrug.

"What? Are you-"

The rest of the sentence got drowned out by a powerful explosion, and the subsequent and noisy collapse of a side wall. After the first seconds of shock, shrieks of fear erupted all around, people trying to leave the area and others going toward the explosion, in search for the kids who were playing there.

They didn't go far, though, as green beams struck them. They fell on the ground, lifeless, and Tracey had the impression that her stomach had just been filled with lead. That was magic, dark magic, and it only meant one thing, as no one else in her family was magical. They had come because of her and, whether it was to kill her or not, they were decimating her family.

She fell on her knees, desperate, and knew that only one person able to help her. She concentrated on him, just as several black-robed persons, obviously wizards, entered the room through the collapsed wall. Her concentration was disrupted, though, when a wizened hand patted her shoulder.

"Here, Tracey." it was his great-grandmother. "This could help." and she opened her other hand. Inside was a golden pendant with a sapphire.

The confused girl didn't react, and the elderly woman clasped the pendant's chain around her neck. Her uncle Albert had joined the other men who, after witnessing the lethal threat, proceeded in throwing each and every piece of furniture toward the assaulting

wizards. They were quite successful, too, as the sheer number of flying chairs, tables, and cutlery prevented the wizards from Banishing them all in one go. While attaching the pendant, Mathilda was talking at the same time

“I just sent a message asking help from an old teacher of mine. I wish we had more time, but we rarely get what we wish for, so listen well. I knew that, some day, one of my descendants would inherit my... talent. How do you think I could have lived so long? I’m 125 years old, you know? None of the others here know about it, though.”

A short pause. She looked at the little girl sadly. “I have to do something about this. I saw several wizarding wars, you know. And I already saw wizards clad like this. They are Death Eaters, and they won’t be pushed away by mere furniture. When everything is over, read this.” she said, pushing a thick envelope in Tracey’s pocket. “I wanted to give it to you later tonight, but, circumstances...”

To Tracey’s shock, the old woman drew... a wand? Her great-grandmother’s next words shook her out of it, though. “Call your friends, now.”

The girl obeyed, and concentrated on Harry again, trying to ignore the sight of her wizened ancestor duelling against the dark wizards. The four friends had practised talking to each other’s mind while she was in Geneva, but it was several hundreds miles away, now, and she needed all her concentration.

The Death Eaters had finally understood how to overcome the resisting family, and Exploding curses were sent in every direction, blasting furniture, walls, and people indiscriminately. Despite Mathilda downing two of them, they concentrated a retaliatory strike on her, and she was targeted by several spells at once. Unable to block them all, she fell down.

“Noooo!” yelled Tracey before rushing to her.

The magic-using ancestor gone, and with only few remaining ammunition, the resisting muggles were quickly dispatched by the

dark wizards. They had magically locked the doors upon arriving, and no one was spared. Once the room was silent again, one of them approached the grieving young girl.

Tracey was clutching her dead great-grandmother, crying her eyes out. It didn't disturb her that the pendant she had just been given was resting between them, absorbing her tears. When the wizard loomed over her, she didn't even register his taunts. She just wanted Harry here.

Harry, who always seemed to have an answer to everything.

Harry, who held so much power that a mere Levitation spell could be categorized as a weapon.

Harry Potter.

“Well well well... it seems that our filthy little mudblood wasn't exactly one, now was she? It doesn't matter, though. She had been born to and raised by muggles, which qualify her as unworthy for the noble House of Slytherin.”

The wizard jerked her upright, and gasped. The girl's pendant was glowing, a clear blue light bathing the scene. And, in the light, somebody shimmered into view with a loud crack.

The dark wizards were surprised of the arrival. Even if they were always wary of Aurors' interventions, they hadn't thought that a mere boy could appear in front of them like that.

The arriving figure was equally surprised, but not because of his presence here. Harry had heard Tracey's anguished call, and had Apparated toward her as fast as possible – thus causing the sound. The sight which surprised him was the scene. It was like a battlefield, with its too many casualties, and, given the circumstances and Tracey's presence, it must have been her family. His surprise quickly melted into anger, and Harry looked back toward the dark wizards with burning eyes. Literally. To their shock, the boy's eyes had morphed away, to be replaced by balls of fire.

Too quickly to be registered, the boy had opened his locket and taken something from inside it. Something which grew as soon as it left the magical storage space. It was a wand, and Tracey shuddered. Whether it was in anticipation or fright, though, she couldn't say: it wasn't a wand she had ever seen Harry use, and it meant only one thing. She closed and shielded her eyes with both arms.

“Lumos.”

Upon hearing the incantation, and despite Tracey's reaction, the wizards wanted to laugh. A Light spell?

When the spell took effect, though, they didn't want to laugh anymore. As Harry had thought it would, a miniature sun appeared in the room. Despite her shielded eyes, Tracey was temporarily blinded, which meant that...

“Aaaaaaaah!” yelled the half-dozen wizards, yanking their white masks off and wiping their crying eyes. It was of no use, though, as their retina was burnt, alongside most of their optical nerve and vision centre. For all purpose, and until the magical world developed a cure to heal them, they would be blind and stay that way.

Harry wasn't, though. For an unexplainable reason – probably related to his equally unexplainable flaming eyes – he wasn't blinded by the light. The dark wizards leader still had Tracey's arm in his hand, though, and Harry calmed enough to realize that, despite being blind, the man could always fire a spell at her unerringly. He lunged forward and grasped her, before leaving to the gaseous reality. The man, feeling her disappear, began casting spells left, right, and centre, and his accomplices did too, thinking they were under attack. Shooting spells blindly can be a cause of mayhem, and three among the seven Death Eaters fell to the floor, dead because of so-called friendly fire.

Once Harry had escaped with a safe Tracey, he relaxed for half a second, before being forced to avoid several wizards apparating to the place. It seemed that the Aurors had arrived. Wait! These weren't the Aurors. Harry got a shock in recognizing his Transfiguration teacher as well as his Headmaster in them. The newly arrived

wizards easily escaped the dangerous beams from the haphazardly aimed spells, and Stunned the dark wizards.

“Just as I feared.” said Dumbledore after a moment of silence. “The Death Eaters have returned, which means Voldemort is active again.”

“But... where is Vol... Voldemort?” asked McGonagall. “I’m glad he didn’t show up, mind you, but nobody saw him, right? How can you be sure?”

Dumbledore stayed silent for a time, and McGonagall was ready to ask her question again, but he raised a hand. “There’s someone with us.”

Harry hadn’t moved out of the scene despite being in the gaseous reality, and he had felt the old man mental scan. Despite being able to shield his mind, he hadn’t thought of shielding his presence. And Tracey hadn’t felt anything.

Dumbledore cast a number of spells to reveal invisible and concealed things and people, but nothing appeared. “Who are you?” said the old man in the air, while the others looked at him inquiringly. It was common knowledge that he was quite... strange, and some even called him crazy behind his back.

During that time, Harry had asked Tracey if she wanted to stay or not, and she answered that she wanted to, but with him. She wasn’t just feeling secure anymore. Not wanting to be seen Apparating in, Harry moved through a wall, arriving in the empty kitchen. Once there, he slowly and silently Apparated in.

“Harry?” Tracey quietly asked, as he was going to exit through the door leading in the main room.

“Yes?” he whispered back.

“Your eyes!”

“What about them?”

“They are... quite blue. Entirely blue, I mean.” She paused, frowning. “Why?”

“I don’t know.” he murmured, looking genuinely curious. “But let’s hide that for now.”

He closed his swirling blue eyes for a second, before opening Harold Thomson’s brown ones. His features also quickly changed back to reflect his fake identity. He finally quickly checked both their minds to see if anything relative to Harry Potter was noticeable. With his guidance and help, Tracey had almost equalled him in Occlumency a few days ago, and her real mind was almost impenetrable. He also gathered the memories of the evening, and learnt about her magical great-grandmother at the same time.

He took her by the hand and, adopting a frightened look, quietly opened the kitchen door.

And faced a few wands aimed at him.

The wands were quickly stowed away when their owners registered their faces.

“Sir?” Harry asked Dumbledore. “What are you doing here? What happened?”

“Well, there seems to have been an attack of dark wizards on the family gathering here. Why are you here?”

“I went with Tracey. It’s her family, sir.”

The old man suddenly appeared older, and sad. “I’m sorry. My condolences, Tracey.”

The young girl was finally registering that her family – her whole family, even the haughty Aunt Isabel and her annoying son Stan – had been wiped out, and she fainted. Harry, feeling her sudden

distress, grasped her just before she fell, and he sat her down on a nearby bench.

The adults left them for a moment, discussing on the things to do next. Harry knew he had to alter some memories, or the fact they were in the kitchen to escape the masked men would be suspect.

While hugging his friend, he focused on his mind, then hers, then the four stunned dark wizards', building a believable story of Tracey's great-grandmother using an unknown spell to blind them all before falling. It was sad to think this way but, as she was dead, she wouldn't mind if he hid his involvement that way.

After a brief interrogation by the Headmaster, they were allowed to go back to Tracey's place, and called a cab to get there.

The two younglings gone, Dumbledore shook his head in sadness at their fate, before registering someone's presence near him. Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody was standing in front of him, his magical eye swivelling in its socket. The retired Auror had an annoyed look on his face.

"What is it, Alastor?"

"I could've told you nobody was there under invisibility or otherwise, Albus." he said.

"I know, I for-

"But it's not what's upsetting me. I was surprised, Albus, and it never happens."

"How comes you were surprised, then? And by what?"

"I checked the rooms around when we arrived, and there was no one alive in all but this main one."

"You mean to say..."

“The two kids weren’t in the kitchen when I looked. They must have entered it between there and now.”

“From outside?”

“That’s why I’m upset about this. There’s no outside door.”

The two old men went silent for a moment, until McGonagall approached them.

“Albus, the Aurors have arrived, and wish an explanation about... why are you both frowning?”

“It’s nothing, Minerva.” Dumbledore answered. “I’m going to check with the Aurors. Good job, Alastor.”

Moody snorted. “There wasn’t anything to do, Albus. They were blinded, and we just took them off.” He paused for a second, his frown deepening. “How is that possible?”

“What do you mean?”

“Imagine the battle scene: plenty of muggles, two Hogwarts students, and an old witch, against nine dark wizards, presumably Death Eaters. Now, we have two unconscious wizards, three dead, and four blinded, the two students in a kitchen, and everyone else dead. What happened in between?”

“I didn’t know they were blind.”

“We just found out after binding and reviving them. However, it was easy to notice, judging by their lack of aiming skill. And it’s not a magical blinding spell, as Finite Incantatum didn’t stop anything. So, I repeat, what happened?”

“I don’t know, Alastor, but it’s something we will have to find out. As we saw upon arriving, those Death Eaters weren’t afraid of casting the Avada Kedavra, even while blinded. The Ministry should have no

qualm in questioning them under Veritaserum, then. Do you want to be there for the interrogation?”

“Of course.”
Davis’ house...

Once home, Tracey fell in tears again and Harry cuddled her, leading her to sit on the sofa.

“What is it?” he asked, before kicking himself mentally. It was the massive death toll around her, of course. No one should be able to witness the killing of their whole families.

She didn’t seem to take offence at his question, though. “It’s just...” she started to say between her sobs, before crying “I’ll never see my parents again!”

She continued to weep for half an hour, and actually fell asleep in his arms. When he tried to move in order to carry her to a bed, though, she unconsciously grasped him in anguish, and he decided to stay.

The next day, a bit calmer, she asked him to bring her to his place. Her house was bringing too many dark memories at the moment. He agreed, and, after she packed her belongings, he Apparated to Geneva with her.

The next few days passed in a subdued atmosphere. Harry had warned his enlarged family about what had happened to Tracey, and had taken upon himself to distract her. While Ron played chess with Hermione, he also brought her to see some comedy movies, like Beethoven or Father of the Bride, and succeeded in making her laugh a couple of times.

They also met Genevieve, whom Hermione befriended quickly, their thirst for knowledge being similar. The woman was faring better, especially around Jorg, and she was now able to speak about her dead colleague without bursting into tears. On Hermione’s insistence, she guided the four of them through the CERN, showing departments and appliances. For once, Ron didn’t say anything about Hermione’s

attitude, as he was as flabbergasted as her. Especially when, using her personal accreditation, Genevieve led them underground, to the LEP itself.

“So...” started Tracey uneasily, looking toward Harry but keeping her eyes low. “It’s here, isn’t it?”

He nodded. “Yes. It’s here.”

He caressed the tube tenderly, as if it was a picture of a long-lost parent, before shaking himself awake. The day before, while eating an ice cream after a movie, Harry had recounted another part of his history to Tracey, and Hermione couldn’t help but ask. “What’s here?”

“My... accident... happened here.” Harry absently answered, before shaking himself. He then nodded to Genevieve, indicating the end of the visit. On their way back, he summed up most of the story of that accident for Ron and Hermione’s benefit, and they looked at him with wide eyes. Tracey was smiling, though, feeling privileged to have had these explanations before them. The rest of the short ride back home was spent in silence and, just as the car was entering the house’s underground parking, Ron saw fit to insert his own comment.

“Seriously, mate, what haven’t you done?”

Harry stayed serious, though, and took several seconds to answer.

“Not much.” he whispered, before exiting the car.

Once alone in his room, the boy threw himself on his bed, and stared at the ceiling. He had wanted to joke back, saying that he hadn’t killed, but his mind had prevented him from saying that, because he had.

He had practically condemned a man to death by starvation. At that time, the Kurd secret services officer he met in Iraq could be dead, for all he knew.

He had also ordered that another man be killed. And he knew that this one was dead, because he had received a mail confirming it.

He perhaps didn't kill per se, but his actions caused death, and he began to cry, beginning to wonder if he was that different from the black-robed wizards he had fought against for Tracey. Speaking of whom...

"Harry?" she asked from the door.

He didn't answer her worried question, and turned to the side, his back to her. He seldom cried, and never in public, and he wasn't going to start now. If he knew her, she would leave him alone.

He didn't know her that well, apparently, because he felt the bed move and her small hand on his shoulder several seconds afterwards. She respected his silence, though, and didn't ask anything more. Cuddled for the first time since a long time ago, he quickly went to sleep.

London, the next Sunday morning...

Harry and his friends Apparated in an empty alleyway near King's Cross train station, and let their flying pets loose, Ron still struggling to control his ruddy eagle. The winged animals were able to find Hogwarts, and they would settle in the castle owlery. With their pets freed, the four students entered the station proper. They had decided beforehand that Ron and Hermione would enter first, followed by Tracey and Harry, the latter travelling in the gaseous reality. Despite what had happened, Tracey didn't want to damage the little bit of good reputation she had made in Slytherin House, and Harry didn't want her to be harmed. With the added security of having an intangible Harry nearby, the girl passed the barrier as inconspicuously as possible. When she did, though, almost every gaze converged on her.

The platform 9¾ was quiet despite the usual number of students returning to school. Several were holding a newspaper, and most of the discussions revolved around the same subject. The Daily Prophet, the most widely spread wizarding newspaper, had reserved four of its five cover columns to the event.

It took all Tracey's willpower, as well as Harry's soothing presence in her mind, for her not to flinch and reach the nearest wagon door. Once there, she found a group of so-called House mates.

"Hey guys, see that? The mudblood has escaped her just treatment."

Marcus Flint, a sixth year Slytherin, also Quidditch Captain and Chaser, was blocking the door, and he wasn't looking happy. Neither was Tracey, though.

"Move aside, Flint."

The arrogant young adult looked down at her, while his retinue was guffawing.

"I'm not going to allow you inside. In fact," he drawled, extracting his wand from a belt holster, "I might even finish the job right there."

In front of Tracey's shocked gaze, he twirled his wand around. "You know," he mused, "the advantage of being of-age is that I can do any sort of magic freely, now. My... father," he whispered, his eyes glinting dangerously, "has made sure that I can do whatever I want. I'm glad not to be in your seat, but I could only advise you to watch your steps. All is going to end soon."

He threw his head back and laughed, the three other Slytherin following him soon after.

Tracey was half angry, half terrified, and on the verge of tears again. Harry's voice in her head almost surprised her.

'Let's go with the others.'

'But...'

'Seeing that pathetic display, I don't want you to endanger yourself before we arrive in the castle.'

A silence, then 'Why?'

'There will be professors there.' lied Harry smoothly. Of the things he hadn't told his friends, his connection to Hogwarts' sentence wasn't the smallest one.

Tracey had felt the change in Harry's tone, but put it on nervousness. She abandoned the Slytherin upperclassmen, and went with Harry to the third wagon, where their two friends were waiting for her. Hermione had borrowed the Prophet from her friend Mandy Brocklehurst, and was rifling through it when Tracey arrived. The usually calm and collected Ravenclaw was huffing, snorting, and scowling at each article. When she saw Tracey, though, she calmed herself and gave her the paper wordlessly. The Slytherin cast a glance at the first page, and gasped. She knew the unmoving people on the animated picture.

Dark Magic witnessed!

by Rita Skeeter

On New Year's Eve, the Aurors had to answer a suspect anonymous call, and presented themselves at 152, Harvesters' Way, Hertford. The scene they found was alarming. Beside the few dead muggles, three members of the respected wizarding society were found lifeless. After closer examination, it appeared that they were hit by the Most Unforgivable spell. Four of their friends, also members of established families, were hit by an unknown curse, most assuredly dark as well. "It's the most severe case of blindness I've ever seen." assured Sheryl Blean, St Mungo Healer. "They probably won't be able to recover sight anytime soon, if ever." According to an inside source, these four have been hit at the same time, confirming this reporter's insights about the curse being Dark.

In shocking attempt of hiding the truth, the old Headmaster of Hogwarts pushed for the investigation to be headed against the victims of these curses instead of the unknown attacker. We all remember He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named, and Dumbledore's fitful attempts to stop him, before Harry Potter took charge of the problem (see adjacent article). Is the aging man going senile? Can't he see

victims of dark magic when they stand in front of him? Retired Auror Alastor Moody made a show of disturbing the Ministry officials and the Minister himself when exiting the Auror building where the victims were being healed. Incidentally, Moody, who some of our readers might remember from the Buckingham cover-up, is also a known friend of said Headmaster. One can reasonably wonder why the retired Auror was there initially. Was he spying for Dumbledore?

Another suspicious event is the disappearance of two young witnesses from the country. During an interview held in a famous wizarding meeting place, Auror Private John Tumbleton swore to this reporter that the two students have used an illegal portkey. Despite Tumbleton having been thrown out of the Leaky Cauldron right afterwards, because of a brawl he had nothing to do with, this reporter continued her search and found the name of one of those two. It links to Dumbledore again, as young Tracey Davis is a Hogwarts student, from the prominent House Slytherin.

See page 3 for an interview with the Minister. An article on page 4 describes Davis' character in depth. Pages 6 and 7 list Dumbledore's inadequate actions in the last 150 years, including keeping a known murderer as groundskeeper and trying to prevent the trial of another.

Harry hadn't left her mind, trying to soothe her. However, he thus read the article at the same time, and she had felt his burgeoning anger. She was now trying to calm him, but something happened, which disrupted her attempts.

Marcus Flint yanked the door open.

"So, I was wondering if the mudblood had taken our advice to heart, but it seems that she didn't." The older boy took a cursory look around the compartment, sneering as he did so. "And what's more, she took refuge in other pitiful arms. What do I see here? A Weasel, which we all know have more children that they can afford. And two other mudbloods."

"What do you know about me?" asked Harry in a steely voice.

“I don’t have to know anything about you. You don’t register in my pureblood list, and you are a Hufflepuff. So there.” the lone boy answered.

“I don’t register, huh?” said a seething Harry, standing up. “I have the feeling you won’t register anyone soon.” he continued, approaching the older teen. Quick as lightning, he jump and his right hand struck Marcus at the base of his neck. The older teen froze.

“What did you do?” asked Ron.

“I learnt a thing or two in China.” Harry merely grunted.

He then ignored Ron’s next question and delved in Marcus’ mind. Fuelled by his anger about his friend’s treatment, he completely modified the older boy’s internal image of her, removing several memories of his magical education which were standing in the way. Marcus would have to beg to repeat a year and, from now on, he would protect Tracey from the other Slytherins. As one of the most influential upperclassmen, it would be easy for him to do so, and it would undermine the “pureblood” intelligentsia.

After clearing Marcus’ immediate memory, Harry extracted himself from the teen’s mind and struck the same neck spot.

“What did you do, Harry?” asked Hermione, who had felt Harry’s concentration.

Harry didn’t answer directly, and, still looking at Marcus, asked him a question. “What do you think about Tracey?”

The older teen looked at him in wonder, before smiling sweetly. “She’s like a sister to me. I’ll protect her from anything.”

“Well, now, I’m sure she’s quite fine.” answered Harry. “Why don’t you go back to your friends?”

The older student left the compartment, and Harry whispered a quick "I'll be right back." before following. When he got back, several minutes later, he was sporting a wide smile.

"Are you alright, now?" asked Tracey.

He smirked. "You could say that, yes. I just changed his mind a little."

At that, the three others snorted.

"What?" Harry asked.

"Only you would call a complete personality reversal a little mind change, that's all." said Hermione.

"Yes, well... it will help Tracey if he protects her instead of the contrary."

"Why did you follow him?" asked Ron.

"I made sure that his friends weren't too... shocked... by his new personality."

"Did you change them as well?" enquired a frowning Hermione.

Harry looked at her. Of the four, she was the most rule-abiding one, and he knew she wasn't readily accepting the fact that he changed people's mind.

"Not much." he answered, and elaborated when Ron snorted. "Really! They will still follow Flint around. It's just that they won't find strange that he'll protect Tracey, now. I don't want him reported to Snape."

"You know, Harry, attacking one's mind isn't-"

"I know, Hermione!" he interrupted. "But we all got our mind invaded by Snape at one point, and I think we have to defend ourselves one

way or another.” His gaze darkened. “I don’t know how anyone could publish this... bullshit, though, and I intend to get to that reporter as soon as I can.”

A pause resulted, quickly interrupted by Harry again. Looking at Tracey with genuine concern in his eyes, he asked “What about you, are you alright?”

She frowned. “I don’t understand why she wrote things under that light. I mean... is it alright to kill my whole family, and that it only gets "the few dead muggles" in it? And the killers...”

She was starting to sob, large tears escaping her eyes, and Harry hugged her.

“Shhh... they’ll get what they deserve.” he said, before the two of them were hugged by Hermione as well.

During all this, Ron had taken the paper and scanned the front page too. “Hey, Harry, there’s one about you, here.”

Harry slowly disentangled an arm from the hug and took the proffered journal, before reading the other article.

Harry Potter, reality or myth?

by Katie Serter

In the light of recent events, or lack thereof, we can ask ourselves the question about the fabled Harry Potter. The dubbed Boy-Who-Lived, supposed sole responsible for the Dark Lord’s demise, ten years ago, hasn’t been witnessed by anyone since then. Several persons around the world made the calculations, and the famous boy should have gone to a magical school this year. This reporter took months to ask each and every major school in Britain first, then in other countries, but none could boast having the illustrious boy in their ranks.

So, after all we know about Albus Dumbledore, was it a manoeuvre for him to disguise the truth once more? See page 8 for a full history of the Potters until their deaths.

Harry looked up. Tracey was looking at him, unsure of what his reaction would be. There was no Marcus to take the steam, now.

But it wasn't necessary. Harry looked back and smiled widely.

"What is it, mate?" asked Ron, half-convinced that Harry had lost it.

"I don't exist anymore, Ron. It's great!"

"I don't think it's that great." stated Tracey. "After all, if you are declared dead, what will happen to everything you own?"

"That's true, Harry." interrupted Ron. "We know you have quite a bit of money, so you must have a vault at Gringotts, don't you?"

Harry looked at his hands, thinking about it. "Alright, I don't want anyone to seize my vaults. What can I do?"

Ron didn't answer, shocked at the plural use of vault. Tracey, however, had thought about it while Harry was reading the article.

"You can send information about you."

"It would have to be anonymous." Hermione interjected, before correcting herself. "I mean... you can't use your own owl, or the school ones, or even the ones you can rent at Hogsmeade Post Office. It would point to Hogwarts. If you want to be that hidden, you'll have to rent one in Diagon Alley or better yet, from another country."

Ron had recuperated, and put his two pence in. "My brother Bill had been pen pal with a student in Beauxbatons. I can ask him the directions to the school."

Harry nodded, and a comfortable silent fell back in the compartment.

After re-reading Harry's article once again, Hermione suddenly frowned. "Did you notice the second article's author? Katie Serter?"

“What about her?” asked Harry, while the others looked equally interested.

“The tone used against Dumbledore is the same as the main article, and I’d bet it’s the same author.”

“But it isn’t the same name.” argued Ron.

“It’s an anagram, Ron.” the Ravenclaw answered. “The letters of her name have been moved around.”

They spent a long time reading the whole paper and discussing about it among themselves. They all snorted when Hermione read the third page, as the Minister’s printed circumlocutions weren’t making sense apart from the man’s obvious objective of freeing the nine attackers from prosecution. Tracey spent the reading of page 4 between tears, snorts, and angry remarks, as the newspapers depicted her as a weak-willed student who paid her way into Hogwarts.

The fifth page was skipped, as it didn’t show anything related to the cover story. The next two pages were more like a History lesson, but Hermione kept reading nonetheless. After all, the man depicted had been an idol for her ever since she had been introduced to the magical world. Only after reading Hogwarts: A History in depth did she change her wish in terms of House. The History lesson was a bit skewed, though, as its author seemed to have dug only negative events.

The other three weren’t as interested but kept listening politely. However, when Hermione reached the 1950s, a sentence made Harry jump.

“Stop, Hermione, please.”

“What?”

“Can you rewind a bit? What was the last sentence?”

She returned to the newspaper and read again, starting at the paragraph top

“In 1940, with a shocking lack of forethought, Albus Dumbledore, at that time Transfiguration teacher, supported the inscription of Rubeus Hagrid into Hogwarts. Three years later, after the Chamber incident and the subsequent death of another student, Hagrid got expelled. We can only wonder, then, why Dumbledore keeps the man working in his castle. Is Hagrid even a human, with his frightening stature? Why is he still workin-”

“The Chamber incident...” Harry whispered, interrupting his Ravenclaw friend.

“What about it?” asked Ron.

Harry looked at him. “Remember when we fetched you in Gryffindor tower?”

The redhead’s gaze darkened. “Yes. I remember. The damn lady-”

“-told us something about it.” interrupted Harry. “She said she couldn’t allow people from other Houses in since the Chamber incident.”

“Is it the same as this one?” asked Tracey.

“I suppose so.” answered Harry. “She said it was around fifty years ago.”

“We will have to check the newspapers of that time.” said Hermione, always the analytical mind. “There’s a whole bookcase of old journals in the Library, most of them never borrowed.”

The rest of the article didn’t bring anything more inspiring, as it listed real or imaginary faults from the old wizard.

“It’s easier to criticize than actually do something.” concluded Ron as Hermione was turning the page.

“This should interest you more, Harry.” she said. “It’s about your parents.”

“Is it from the same author?” he asked.

“Well... yes. Seems so. Another anagram, though.”

“I’ll take it with care then. I’m not sure that what she writes is 100 percent correct, after all.”

While he listened intently, Hermione began to read the story of his parents. Apparently, judging from the author’s words, they had gone to Hogwarts, his dad had played Quidditch and had been an arrogant prick, while his mother had been good in Charms, and had also been an "ice queen". He also discovered that they had gone into hiding, the reporter listing several reasons for this, each of them as futile as the next.

He found out that there was a spell useable to hide a place from wizards, and stored this bit of information for later use. The Fidelius Charm, though, needed someone to be designated as Secret Keeper, and the one for his parents had apparently been one of their friends, Sirius Black. Said Sirius Black had apparently betrayed them, selling the location to Voldemort before killing another of his parents’ friends, Peter Pettigrew, in a busy street full of muggles. He had been condemned without a trial. Another friend of them, one Remus-

“Wait a minute, Hermione. You said "Sirius Black"?”

“Yes, why?”

“Return to Dumbledore’s page, please. I just remembered that there’s something about him there.”

She did, and found the line. “You’re right. It’s written that Dumbledore asked for a fair trial, but the evidences were overwhelming, and a panel of judges headed by the Minister himself condemned the man to a life sentence in Azkaban.”

Ron shuddered.

“What?” asked Harry.

“Azkaban.” the redhead muttered.

“What about it?” enquired Hermione. “It’s a prison, isn’t it?”

“It’s not just a prison. It’s guarded by the Dementors!”

“What are the Dementors?” asked Tracey.

“They... You don’t want to be near them. They suck the happiness out of you. I heard that prisoners in Azkaban barely stayed sane, plunging into dementia after mere months.”

A silent pause crept in the compartment and, when a knock resounded from the sliding door, they jumped in fright.

“Candies, kids?” asked the woman.

The four children looked at each other, laughing nervously, before going for the chocolate frogs. A good bit of chocolate always helped depressed moods.

After eating some animated chocolate amphibians, the four of them discussed the varied cards accompanying the frogs. Ron got a card about Montague Knightley, a wizard chess champion. Hermione got Bridget Wenlock, the first Arithmancer to establish the properties of the number seven. Tracey got Bowman Wright, and grinned when she read the description. The man was famous for creating the golden Snitch, in the 16th century. However, what made Tracey grin was the fact that he was a half-blood, and that gave her verbal ammunition against the pureblood bigots in her House. And Harry got Herpo the Foul.

He frowned.

“What is it?” asked Tracey.

“It says here that he’s an ancient Greek, the first known creator of the basilisk.” he answered.

“And?”

He looked up. “What’s a basilisk?”

Ron frowned too, concentrating. “I think it’s a kind of snake. I remember Dad speaking about it once, but Mum... it’s strange, because she interrupted him and asked if we had cleaned our rooms.”

“It was perhaps a manoeuvre to stop him from talking.” proposed Hermione.

“Yeah, perhaps.”

“Anyways, we can always search in the Library.” she concluded, and, despite their discreet roll of eyes, the others nodded.

During the rest of the trip, they ate other frogs and discussed several more cards, before receiving the visit of Fred and George. The twin pranksters recounted their prank-plotting holidays, and the others laughed at the state Snape would be in, in the near future. After a good laugh at the description of certain newly-invented spells, the twins left, returning to Lee and the Chaser girls.

Over the rest of the long trip, several groups of students walked in, most of them members of the study group – for which they still hadn’t found a name. These students didn’t seem to agree about seeing a Slytherin in the compartment, but didn’t have any choice in the matter. Harry wasn’t happy about their reaction either, and decided that he would try to ask the Headmaster for a declaration against House prejudice.

Mandy and Padma were one of these groups, and they looked at three of them suspiciously, before holding a whispered conversation

with Hermione. Harry and Tracey were trying to hold themselves against Ron's chess skills at that moment, and none of them remarked the blush the three girls were developing.

One hour afterward, Susan entered the compartment too, and lunged to Harry.

"Thank you! Thank you, thank you, thank you..."

"Er... You're welcome?" Harry stuttered, before remembering. During his Christmas spree, he had stopped at a jewellery shop and, not knowing what would please the plait-haired Hufflepuff, he had settled on a gold-plated necklace with an onyx pendant – Hufflepuff's colours.

Susan forcefully settled between Harry and Tracey, ignoring the miffed glance from the latter, and they spent the next hour in chit-chat about the study group and Hogwarts in general. When she left, Tracey retook her seat next to Harry.

"Annoyed?" he asked.

"Mmm Mmmm." she agreed, before smirking. "She took my place. I missed my comfy pillow."

"Hey!" he said, startled. "I'm not a pillow!"

"Pity. I'll have to find another." she answered, pouting.

"Er... no, it's fine." replied Harry, his expression a mixture of different feelings. It was all it took to break the light tension, and the three others laughed, quickly joined by a red-faced boy.

Some more hours later, the train pulled up in Hogsmeade Station, and the students poured out of the train, meeting each other as a large group. Hagrid was there, too, but he looked a bit put out and merely showed the way to the horseless carriages. Once there, Hermione looked around, quite annoyed.

"What?" asked Ron.

“Hogwarts: A History says that there are creatures pulling the carriages, but I can’t see any! They must have changed and charmed the carriages to travel-”

“No.” interrupted Harry.

“They are beautiful.” said Tracey dreamily.

“Terrible, too.” confirmed Harry.

“What are you two on about?” asked Hermione.

“You can see them?” enquired Ron, ignoring her.

Harry and Tracey, who were patting a seemingly invisible and overly large horse, nodded at the same time, before shaking themselves awake. They all climbed inside the large wagon, joining the group of six students already there. Incidentally, it was Fred and George, with Lee, Katie, Angelina and Alicia.

“So,” repeated Ron, “can you see them?”

“See what?” asked Fred.

Harry and Tracey looked at each other, before answering Ron’s question. “Yes. You couldn’t?”

“That’s what I thought.” Ron replied, not answering Harry’s question.

“What do you mean?” asked Hermione, unhappy to be kept out of the loop.

“See what?” repeated George.

Ron looked at everyone, before focussing on Tracey. “I remember a talk between Bill and Percy, a long time ago. Bill had told Percy not to go in the Forbidden Forest – not that he would have, mind you – and

he spooked him with a tale of a dead student. I'm not sure about it being false anymore, though, because he also spoke of the Thestrals."

"The Thestrals?" enquired Tracey.

"Aren't they the creatures pulling the carriages?" asked Hermione. "I remember that, in *Hogwarts: A History*, they wrote it was Thestrals pulling the carriages, but I couldn't see them."

"One can't see Thestrals," stated Ron sombrely "unless one witnesses death."

While Harry held a crying Tracey again, an ominous silence filled the wagon, only broken by the sound of powerful hooves on the path.

As they were passing the Hogwarts gates, physical object marking the wards limit, Harry suddenly gasped, bringing his hand to his head in obvious pain.

"What?" "Hey, Harry, what is it?" "Are you alright?"

While the others shouted these questions, Harry winced, trying to adjust to the castle's overwhelming joy. Visibly, Cassie was exuberant, and showered Harry with images of the holidays, in no particular order: empty corridors; a potion simmering; Dumbledore being dressed; Malfoy strutting in the empty corridors; Snape entering a black door; students playing chess, and opening Christmas gifts.

The flow was difficult to control, but the castle eventually finished sending him pictures, and Harry relaxed, just as the carriage arrived near the castle entrance. He used the pretext of a sudden headache, and they got out to follow the other students inside. His three closest friends, though, eyed him suspiciously in the way, and only let it drop once entering the Entrance Hall. It wasn't by their own will, though, but by a group of three students.

Malfoy was here, his two bodyguards back from vacation right behind him. Unbeknownst to the four friends, Malfoy Junior was just coming back from the infirmary, where his damaged face had been healed.

“So! Another term with mudbloods. I can’t wait...” he said, but interrupted himself suddenly.

He blinked, and one of his grey eyes seemed to acquire a metallic glint.

“Welcome back, Harry.” he said in a different voice, to the surprise of everyone in hearing range, which included Harry and his three friends, as well as Crabbe and Goyle.

However, the surprise was short-lived, as the boy shook himself, looking at Harry suspiciously. Without another word, he left, following the other Slytherins toward the Great Hall. The blond boy was whispering with his bodyguards, and Harry thought he heard an angry “What happened?” coming from him.

After a few seconds, the four friends shook themselves and headed in the same direction. Harry paused at the bottom of the stairs and looked back, but he didn’t see anything. He shook his feeling of being observed away, and followed his friends.

In the darkness near the floor of the Entrance Hall, though, a pair of small and beady eyes followed him until he turned a corner.

Once everyone was seated, Dumbledore stood to address the crowd, and only the most observant students noticed that he seemed older than usual.

“Welcome back!” said the elderly wizard genially. “And, without further ado, I invite you to share this feast.”

As usual, when Albus Dumbledore sat down, the food appeared, and everyone dug in, exchanging holiday stories at the same time. Ron recounted a select part of his vacation, and listened to Dean, Seamus, and Neville’s. In the latter case, his newly-attuned mind picked

several holes, and he filed that information in the back of his mind. Harry was exchanging stories with Susan, Hannah, Ernie, and Justin. Hermione was doing the same with Padma and Mandy, continuing their hushed conversation. And Tracey was assaulted by her year mates for information on whether the Daily Prophet's articles were genuine or not. As Slytherin, most of them had long since realized that everything written wasn't always true. During the meal, Malfoy's eyes searched for her, but he was always encountering Marcus Flint's large frame. The older student, true to his new personality, had taken upon himself to sit near Tracey and to protect her from the most acerbic remarks.

After the meal, the students returned to their dorms, and the castle settled down for another term.

Despite the fact that the Potion professor seemed a little unconcerned by his lessons, everything quickly returned to normalcy. Harry had had several ideas over the holidays, though, and wanted to push them forward. That's why, after the first Herbology lesson, he waited for the greenhouse to empty before approaching his Head of House.

"Professor?"

Pomona Sprout jumped, startled. Not used to students staying after lessons, she had started putting fertilizers in several pots of knotgrass. She looked around wildly, before stopping at Harry.

"Yes, Mr. Thomson?" she asked, putting the nutrients jar away and wiping her hands on her blouse.

Harry was wondering how one's hands could be cleaner by wiping them on a dirtier cloth, but he shook himself awake in front of the teacher's inquiring gaze.

"I had several ideas over the holidays, and I wanted to share them with you."

"Of course." she answered. After all, even if she preferred plants, her task as Head of House was to listen to her charges. Not that she

complained, though, as most of them seemed too timid to approach her.

Harry was still speaking. "Then, in turn, you can ask the Headmaster about them."

That perked her interest. "What is it about?"

"Do you know that a study group has been created, earlier this year, with students from several Houses in it?"

"Why, yes. Albus... I mean... the Headmaster, he told us about it once." she replied, before thoughtfully adding "He seemed oddly happy about it."

Harry smiled. If the old man was happy about it, he would surely accept his propositions. "The problem is, we don't have a room."

"What do you mean? There's the Library, the Great Hall, the classrooms..."

"Madam Pince, the librarian, requires silence in her domain, and I agree about it. We all do." he answered, starting to count on his fingers. "The Great Hall is quite large, and not usable around meals. And we don't want to disturb the classrooms."

"What do you want, then? What do you propose?" she was rather curious. It wasn't everyday that Hufflepuffs were putting themselves in the light to ask for something.

"I... err... we want an inter-house common room. A common common room, if you like."

She smiled at the weak joke and thought about it. The more she did, the more it seemed an interesting idea. Better that than having students scattered on the ground, catching cold and whatnot.

“Well... I’m sure that the Headmaster can spare an old classroom for this.” she smiled warmly at her charge. “It’s a good idea, and I’ll talk to him about it soon.”

“Thank you, Professor.” he said, but didn’t move.

“Was there anything else?” she asked.

“Actually, I just had another thought. I once overheard somebody playing music in... in the common room,” he started, hiding which common room it was, “and I thought then that it could be a good idea to group music players from all Houses. From what you just told me, I think that the Headmaster could give them another classroom.” After a pause, he added “Silenced from the outside, of course.”

“So, what you mean is to build a new wing to the castle, and that would be enough?” The woman joked, laughing.

“No, but three rooms should be enough. After all, they can be enlarged, can’t they?”

“Why three? And how do you know about enlarging rooms?”

“Well... I read Hogwarts: A History, and it says that the house-elves working here had a hand designing the castle inside, enlarging rooms when necessary.” which was the truth. He didn’t tell her that he could enlarge the room himself, though. “And the third room would be to allow us to play games and such, like chess. The first room would only be for studying.”

Seeing her pensive expression, he smiled. “It’s just a few thoughts, I... that is... we don’t expect anything.”

“It’s alright, Mr Thomson. Quite alright. I’ll tell the Headmaster about this. Now, I believe you have another class?”

He looked at his watch, and his eyebrows shot up. “Damn. Err... sorry. I meant...”

She smirked. "Let's not make Professor Binns wait too long, then."

He agreed and, with another thank-you, darted out of the greenhouse. Pomona Sprout was still thoughtful when her next class filed in, a few minutes afterwards.

That evening, after yet another delectable dinner, Albus Dumbledore retired to his office, followed by the three Heads of House present – Severus Snape hadn't showed himself at the meals anymore than he did before Christmas.

Once in the cluttered office, the aged Headmaster sat down and sighed, before summoning a house-elf.

"Hanky?" he asked, snapping his fingers – the usual summoning motion for a house elf.

However, said house-elf didn't answer, and another one appeared.

"Hanky caught a cold, Headmaster sir. He is not feeling well. Funky replace him. Is Hanky required, Headmaster sir?"

Dumbledore smiled tiredly. "No, it's alright. Can you fetch Professor Snape?"

The house-elf wrinkled his nose distastefully, before answering. "I is going to fetch Professor." he said, before disappearing with a crack.

'Why did he crinkle his nose?' thought Dumbledore, before hearing a discreet cough. He looked up and saw McGonagall looking at him concernedly.

"What is it, Minerva?"

"You should rest, Albus. You seem very tired."

He sighed again, and nodded. The worst was that he didn't understand why he was so tired. Was his advanced age finally catching up on him? He sure felt better before Christmas.

Christmas...

He went to China...

His reflections were interrupted by a loud knock at his office door.

“Enter, Severus.”

The addressed man entered, as haughty as ever, but the old man found a disturbing glint in his eyes. Like... smugness? It disappeared quickly, though, and they started to discuss the day, as they did each evening. Most of these reunions weren't productive, but today, Sprout spoke up first, to everyone's surprise – including hers.

“I heard a most curious request today.”

She then repeated Harry's words. Their reactions were as she had thought they would be: varied. While Flitwick was positively gleeful at the idea of a music room, Snape was looking darkly at no one in particular, muttering angry words about brats and frilly things. Dumbledore and McGonagall, though, looked at each other briefly and the old man nodded once.

“Who asked about it?” the Transfiguration teacher enquired.

“Surprisingly, it was a first year. Harold Thomson.”

Upon hearing the name, McGonagall looked pensive for a while. Despite not belonging to her House, that name wasn't unknown to her. After all, everyone remembered the Sorting of that particular student. There was also a metal sink still in her private quarters, and the foot imprint in it had yet to be explained.

Dumbledore broke the silence. “It's an interesting proposition, which I shall put to vote. Who's against?”

Severus raised his hand but, as he was alone, he lost the vote. He knew it wasn't done, though. Slytherin may be only one of four

Houses at Hogwarts but they were the most cunning and ambitious of the lot. In fact, since the founding of the school, the Slytherins have always ruled from behind the scene, and they didn't want their hold on the wizarding world threatened. There was no chance that Dumbledore's foolish ideas could pass the vote of the Board of Governors. Especially now that Lucius Malfoy was heading it. Since the blond man also had the Minister in his pocket, there was also no chance that any such ideas about education could bypass the Ministry.

"Very good, very good." stated the Headmaster. "I'll put it on schedule for the next Board meeting, right next to the pre-school classes we discussed last time."

Internally, Snape smirked. Let the old man have his little pleasures...

Said man broke his reverie by addressing him directly. "On another topic, Severus, I need to see young Draco Malfoy."

The addressed Potion Master raised his head suddenly. "Why? I'm perfectly able to treat everything relative to my House. Has he broken the rules?"

While Dumbledore noticed the sharpness in the man's voice, he didn't react to it. "I simply want to have a discussion with him."

Snape stayed silent for a few seconds, before agreeing. Everyone could hear the reluctance in his voice, though. "When?"

"This Saturday afternoon will do. I have other things to do before then."

"Rest, for example." said McGonagall curtly, although her fondness for the old man was audible.

Snape looked like he wanted to roll his eyes, but refrained. "Are we dismissed, then?"

"If there's nothing else, Severus..."

The Potion Master looked like he wanted to speak up. There was something, actually. According to his faithful spies, Marcus Flint, one of his sympathisers, seemed to have changed his mind over the holidays. Not only wasn't he the brutal teenager he was before, but he also seemed to have taken a first year under his wing. A particular muggle-born one.

However, Snape had other fishes to fry, none of which in this room. He would get to Flint when he would be able to, not before.

"Nothing else." he said.

The three other Heads repeated the same words, and Dumbledore adjourned the session.

Later...

To Harry, the first Potion lesson of the term seemed a bit... off. Every student paying a tad bit of attention to the teacher noticed it as well.

Snape gave them their customary scrolls with different recipes and collected their result at the end, as usual. But he didn't stroll through the room like before. In fact, the Potion Master didn't show himself for half of the period, spending most of the time in the private study behind the classroom, doing Merlin-knows-what.

Harry wanted to know what was going on in the Potion Master's mind, and decided to start his "underground" attacks again. He didn't want to be noticed, though, and chose to do so in the evening, after the Astronomy period.

As soon as the aforementioned period finished, he rushed out and, right after passing the first corner, he hid in the best hiding place he knew of: the gaseous reality. He just had to hide, not move, so it didn't matter if he couldn't move in it. But he was in for a shock.

The grey substance around him had recovered its gaseous appearance, not the steel-like hardness of before. And the air wasn't restricting his movements anymore. Not caring about the shadows moving around him and through him, he whooped in joy. That must

be what Rowena Ravenclaw had asked Cassie... to ease him in his travels. The shadows were first year students coming back from the Astronomy tower, and they didn't notice anything. He Apparated in his still-desert dorm and dropped his school bag before closing his bed curtains. If he wanted to be out, better give the illusion that he was asleep. Just to be sure, he magically locked the curtains – another interesting spell from Alison.

He then Apparated out of his locked bed, and "walked" through its curtains and out of Hufflepuff cellar. He had decided not to pass through unknown walls, since he didn't know whether they were specifically warded against Apparation or what was behind them. Cassie was on his side, but some people might be paranoid enough to have warded their quarters heavily, he thought, and the Potion Master could very well be one of them. So he followed the regular path.

Travelling through the gaseous reality was quicker and easier than walking. It also had the added bonus of circumventing the caretaker and his darn cat. Filch and Mrs Norris were patrolling the corridors, but Harry passed through them without raising a doubt in the Squib's mind. And the cat wasn't caring about anything else than mice tonight.

As Snape's quarters were right next to the Potion classroom, the only way to get to the former on foot included a trip in front of the latter. Passing there, Harry noticed that the classroom door was open, which suggested that someone was working late. Someone being the unknowing target of an intangible boy.

Harry passed through the half-open gaseous door and didn't notice anything out of order. Snape must be working in his office, he reflected, and he advanced towards the office's door. He was advancing through the numerous desks of the room, having reached its centre, when he noticed something shocking.

On the wall in front of him, supposedly separating Snape's office from the classroom proper, a round hole had appeared, barely a foot in diameter. And, in it, a face had appeared.

Although it wasn't quite a face.

It was a part of a face, including an eye in a middle of a patch of skin, and the whole thing was silver in appearance. The eye was looking right at him, and it blinked once before closing and disappearing behind the now closed hole. Harry got the eerie feeling that he had been winked at.

Faint words from the other room shook him from his reflection, and he made out the words "pay attention" in the middle of a heated diatribe. Despite the voice being muffled by the gaseous reality, Harry instinctively knew these words must be Snape's. And he wasn't alone.

He passed through the door and noticed the surroundings. There were three persons around a cauldron. The tallest was stirring it, and Harry immediately associated the lanky shape with Snape. The shortest seemed to be a young student, and was standing near the door. The third, a flabby figure looking like it was helping Snape, was totally unknown to him. In his form, Harry couldn't identify people by sight, and had to enter the peoples' mind to do so. However, that action was delayed by what he had in front of him.

The cauldron was simmering, but its content was fully visible in the gaseous reality!

‘What does that mean? What does that mean?’ Harry asked himself frantically, before remembering the persons in front of him. ‘Those three must know.’

Knowing that Snape's mind was a fortress and not wanting to be trapped in an unknown mind, Harry focused on the student's mind. After levitating over an impressive – albeit static – defence wall, he entered the consciousness building, and found himself in front of two surprises.

Decidedly, the evening was full of revelations, as the student whose mind he was browsing was Draco Malfoy. It wasn't all, though. Another being was sharing the consciousness building with the boy, a being Harry had already seen. Its stony body looked like it had been splashed with a silvery goo over the right eye, something which reminded Harry of the eye he had seen through the wall.

Hogwarts' consciousness.

‘So, Cassie is sharing Malfoy's body?’ he reflected. He hadn't thought about it previously, but it could be the reason behind the blond's apparent schizophrenia. He spent a full minute digesting the fact, and concluded that, since the school was functioning normally, the stony consciousness in front of him must be a copy. It made him think about himself for a second. ‘What happened to Copycat?’

However, he didn't have all night to ponder over his computer-borne self, as there was still the question about the cauldron. He left the white building hosting Draco's consciousness and the copy of Cassie's, and searched through the boy's mind for the memories linked to the cauldron.

There wasn't much there, though. Obviously, Snape didn't tell the boy about everything. Harry could extract some data, though. It was very secret and needed constant attention. It was brewed for Snape's personal use and contained several of the potions the Slytherins had been brewing over the previous term. It needed a month to brew and there was only one week left. And it had a link to the castle being sentient.

The castle!

Harry's thoughts were churning. Was Snape trying to contact Cassie? It was a funny thought, because a copy of said consciousness resided a mere yard from him. However, Harry didn't laugh about it. If the spiteful teacher could Apparate in the castle...

Harry shuddered, and decided that the potion needed to be sabotaged. The cauldron was simmering in the gaseous reality as well, so it could surely be altered from there.

He rummaged through his pockets, but found nothing except crumbs from a lump of bread taken away two days ago. ‘That won't do.’ he thought, and wondered what could be used to perfectly foil a potion brewing. Something acidic, preferably. And liquid, so as to mix with the potion immediately. And if it was bubbly, it would cause even

more damage. Harry, having grown up in the muggle world, had one immediate answer for all these criteria: cola.

However, where can one find a can of cola at 2am in a wizarding place?

Harry smirked. His dorm mate Justin was perhaps a right pain in the rear concerning homework, but he was muggle-born and hadn't lost his habit of drinking the brown stuff just because he was in a wizarding school. The first spell he had researched on his own had been the cooling Charm, and a part of his trunk had been labelled "Coke fridge."

Harry made a quick round-trip there, and found himself hovering over the cauldron again. This time, though, he had crossed Malfoy on his way back and only Snape was there, the unknown man seeming to have left too. The Potion Master was continually stirring, checking the recipe from time to time to see if everything was alright. Just when Harry wondered how someone could keep brewing potions during the night, he witnessed the man gulping down something from his pocket. 'Energizing potions.' he thought.

Well, energizing potions or not, the man was going to be shocked soon. Harry opened the can, drank some of its content, and liberally poured the rest of it over the simmering cauldron. In the back of his mind, he knew he was making a harsh decision, but everything about what Snape was doing recently screamed danger.

The potion changed its colour brusquely, and Harry distinctively heard Snape curse frantically, before recoiling from the cauldron, which content started to overflow it, eating everything in its path. The Potion Master, having worked with potions almost all his life, knew what to do about such accidents, and drew his wand just as the cauldron itself looked like it was going to melt. He cast a spell which Harry didn't know, and the cauldron froze, with everything around it.

The Potion Master was pouring over the book, turning the pages frenetically. The man was quite mad, muttering incoherent things under his breath. As Snape's mind was focused on the recipe, Harry judged that the moment was opportune for a little exploration. He

entered the man's mind, intent on finishing digging his tunnel towards Snape's protected memories, like he had started to do before – after all, he had been there to do exactly that, initially. He didn't, though.

To say that he was shocked would be an understatement.

He was stunned out of his wits.

And that state made him forget elementary precautions.

He stepped forward.

In front of his mind's eye, there was Snape's usual bunker-like mind, but it was ensconced in something he would recognize anywhere.

A black shroud.

The same kind than the one in his own mind, where it was kept inside a robust turret.

It was stronger here, though. And malevolent.

Recognition struck him, hard, as the stone turret protecting his mind from the black shroud in it began to crack under the pressure.

On top of that, when he had stepped forward, he had activated the defence mechanisms from Snape's mind, which he knew wasn't completely Snape's by now. Fire erupted in all directions from the black shroud, while dragons – he knew the term, now – took off from the shroud and headed his way. A large dome started to form around the mind, like Sarah's, although this one was slower and had an ominous crimson colour as well.

He didn't want to fight the alien presence there, as it would mean a possibly lethal disconnection from his body.

Just as he hurriedly stepped back, the dome snapped shut mere inches from his face. He didn't want to test the theory of whether the dragons were able to attack through it, and quickly returned to his own body and mind.

However, the mind he had invaded now belonged to one of the most famous Legilimencer in the wizarding world. As soon as he reached his own mind, he felt that the alien presence had followed. A gaunt wizard with slanted crimson eyes and thin nostrils had appeared around his mind, and Harry instinctively sensed that the thing that had just appeared was more than a mere mind probe. The alien wizard had brought most of his power into the confrontation.

“Well well well... it seems that there’s a little one creeping in the dark?” hissed the man, before advancing in the seemingly unprotected mind, browsing random memories from the fake mind. “You are a most strange person... student... boy... Harold Thomson.”

Following the man’s progression in his real mind, Harry waited for him to get to a certain point before trying to counter-attack. An Occlumens was always stronger in his own mind, and he hoped that the surprise would be sufficient to push the powerful invader away.

The snake-like man stopped right on top of the buried turret, and Harry groaned. His defences weren’t all well placed to attack the intruder at that place, and he would have to improvise.

“What is this?” the man asked, looking down. “I can feel... There is something here that belongs to me.”

Muttering, he kneeled, and started to dig the soft earth with his hands. “I would recognize this from anywhere.” he was saying. “But I don’t remember giving that to anyone that young... except the Potter brat.”

Harry gasped. The intruder had to be driven away now, or he would discover everything! Taking advantage of the man’s lack of attention, he ordered his morphed beasts to take back their initial forms and approach the man silently.

It wasn’t long before the digging man stumbled against a stone. “Hiding one’s powers? How Slytherin, for a...”

He looked up, and stopped talking. The crimson eyes widened.

And utter chaos erupted.

Harry had, a long time ago, transformed his four mind-guarding dragons into innocent-looking memories. They attacked the man viciously, but he wasn't devoid of resources either, and protected himself with a strong shield before attacking back. Spells and fire crossed each other, with physical attacks intermingled, while Harry was witnessing all this from his control room. When one of his dragons fell from the man's attacks, a couple minutes after beginning the fight, he decided to push all his might into the creatures, and smiled when they succeeded in grasping the man's limbs at the same time.

"NOOO! You can't do this to me!" the man bellowed. "I am Lord Voldemort!"

Even if Harry had known that the alien presence in Snape's mind could very well be the self-appointed Dark Lord, the shock caused by the name made him pause, something Voldemort used to extricate his bleeding limbs from the creatures. The man then made a complicated gesture towards the white building supposedly hosting Harold's consciousness. The building had been the outlet for Harry's real mind but hadn't been reinforced, and collapsed quickly. Just as Harry felt the connection was going to be cut, he pushed some more magic into his defenders.

He didn't know if they received it, though, as everything went black. A bit earlier, in the Headmaster's quarters...

Albus Dumbledore was awoken by a bad feeling. His medallion was freezing and thumping against his chest. Grasping it and connecting to the castle's sentient mind, he discovered that a battle was going on in the Potion office. Strangely, he couldn't point out who was battling who, as the castle only showed a still picture of the lab.

He hurried through the corridors and, arriving in the potion lab, understood why the castle had sent him a still picture: the room itself

was still, the cauldron frozen in a spell preventing a visible disaster, and Snape immobilized.

‘That’s twice this year already.’ the aged Headmaster thought, before levitating the Potion Master and leaving the room toward the Hospital Wing. The uneasy feeling didn’t leave him, though, and he stopped at the door to cast a glance around.

As he was leaving the office, a pair of small eyes followed his every move from under a chair.

The spirit of Lord Voldemort was taken by surprise by the quick collapse of the white building. He battled with the dragons for a while, but, instead of disappearing, they seemed to have grown stronger and more vicious after the consciousness building’s cave-in, and he eventually fell back to the mind border. Escaping the three vicious beasts, he turned around and took another step...

...and found himself in a room which resembled the potion lab, except that the walls were grey. And he was paralysed. Stuck as if he was inside a transparent mould.

As he was stuck, he couldn’t even turn around and thus missed Harry’s presence behind him. He didn’t understand what was happening exactly, and not understanding things made him rage.

Suddenly, he caught a movement. In the uniformly grey room, a grey animal budged from a crack in the wall. Taking hold of an animal was better than being powerlessly stuck in the grey room, and Voldemort pushed his mind forward. Even with his shape stuck in the hard mould, he could still possess living beings with his mind. And he could transfer his mind completely as well.

He got a mild surprise. The rat was Pettigrew in his animagus form. He had thought that the man had left the room but the rat had come back without him knowing.

Keeping the rat form, he looked around but didn’t find anything more. Snape wasn’t there anymore, something Wormtail’s memories gave him the reason for. Dumbledore. More importantly, he didn’t find a trace of Harold Thomson, the Hufflepuff behind Snape’s aggression.

Smirking internally, he took whole control of the rat and decided to pay a visit to Hufflepuff's common room soon. The boy whose identity he had grasped was too strange not to be explored better. Dragons as sole mind defence? Come on...

It was in this agitated state of mind that the rat hosting Wormtail and Voldemort's consciousnesses left the Potion lab. As Dumbledore had closed the door, the rat had to transform into a human to open it. In that shape, he noticed his diary on a shelf and pocketed it. Verifying that the corridor was empty, he closed the door, before morphing into the rat form again.

Despite his experience as a Dark Lord, Voldemort wasn't used to the reflexes to have as a mere rat, and quickly felt a heavy and furry animal falling on his back. Claws pierced his sides, and threw him in the air. He didn't control his fall as well as Wormtail would have, and fell on his back, cracking several vertebrae in the process.

Mrs Norris, the caretaker's cat, returned to the rat's prone form and prodded it a few times, before deciding that it was dead and safe to bring home. The cat was often bringing the product of her hunts to her master, who was kind enough to share them with her.

However, during the trip toward Filch's office, the rat woke a bit, and Voldemort decided to switch to a more manageable form. To say that Mrs Norris was shocked to feel her prey transform into a portly man would be an understatement. She fled him, barely escaping the angry kick headed her way.

When an animagus switched forms, though, the wounds weren't healed, and Wormtail's body was now sporting deep gashes in his sides. Voldemort knew he had to heal his wounds quickly, and only thought of one safe location: his own home. On wobbly legs, partly due to his exhaustion and his damaged spine, he left the castle and Apparated there as soon as he reached the wards limits. And he didn't notice that his diary wasn't in his torn pockets anymore. The next day...

Most of the students were glad that Severus Snape was out of service again. Instead of skipping classes, though, they had the mixed pleasure of having the Headmaster himself teaching them the subject once again. Being an accomplished Alchemist, the old Headmaster taught them some subtle grinding processes and metallurgy tips, before brewing a mild acid designed to remove dead organic substance. It was the perfect soap, but had the drawback of burning away clothing as well, as poor Neville Longbottom experienced.

On the evening, Dumbledore met with his three remaining Heads of House, for their customary meeting. That's when he learnt about Harold Thomson's disappearance. Several first years had notified Sprout at dinner, after unsuccessfully waiting the whole day for the boy to appear.

Dumbledore, feeling the same uneasiness as the night before, immediately grasped the medallion, but the castle didn't answer him. He slumped back on his chair.

After an awkward pause, he spoke. "I guess we have to organize a search."

"A search?" asked McGonagall. "You always seemed to know every nook and cranny of the castle before, including everyone's place. Your medallion doesn't work anymore?" she asked, pointing at the device.

"My... what?" he asked.

She huffed. "Don't play innocent, Albus. In all the years we spent here, as soon as you wanted to know something about the castle or its population, you grasped the damn thing. You were discreet before, but I just saw you doing it. What is it?"

Dumbledore slumped again. 'Time to confess,' he thought bitterly. "Very well. I think you have to know, but please, don't tell anyone else."

They sat closer, as if they were on the verge of hearing a secret – which they were, in fact.

“A long time ago, when I was a mere teacher, I came across this medallion when our previous Headmaster called a meeting like this one. When it came to an end, I stayed and asked him about it, because I was drawn to it. He told me that it was only a mundane piece of jewellery. Its only interest was that it was made by Godric Gryffindor himself. I asked for it and he sold it to me.”

“Sold it?” asked McGonagall.

“Yes. Sold it. Headmaster Dippet wasn’t fond of it, but knew that it could fetch a good price on the market. He was still complaining that, as Headmaster, he couldn’t sell it outside of the castle. Something about wards.”

“What does it do?” asked Flitwick, bringing the conversation back on its initial track.

Dumbledore smiled. “First, you have to ask yourselves what would happen to a building in which magic is performed on a daily basis during a thousand years.”

The three Heads looked at each other, not understanding the link. McGonagall was the first to answer. “I don’t know.”

“Exactly, Minerva. We don’t know. But, apparently, it starts to develop abilities. And the one we are speaking about now is its sentience.” Ignoring the gobsmacked expressions his favourite teachers sported, he continued. “The Founders had envisioned the thing, though, and I found out that each has prepared a mean to link oneself to the castle. I don’t know about the others, but Gryffindor created this pendant and, by grasping it, I can connect to the castle.”

“How comes Dippet didn’t find about it?” asked Sprout, always down-to-earth.

The others were more knowledgeable about the former Headmaster's magical abilities – or lack thereof – and smirked at the question.

“Let's say he was more interested in politics.” stated Dumbledore, before turning serious again upon seeing the reflective look of McGonagall.

The Head of Gryffindor was frowning. “Albus... you said the Founders prepared links to the castle, yet you spoke only about Gryffindor's. What about the others?”

“I didn't find about the others, Minerva. I stumbled upon the information when searching about the medallion only, and didn't push my research further.”

“What does the connection allow?” asked Flitwick.

Dumbledore turned toward the diminutive Professor. “It depends. The castle is sentient, but not very... I don't know how to say it. Let's just say that you can ask anything simple enough to be understood by a 5 or 6 years old child. When I understood the meaning of it, I asked the castle to warn me when students were out of class. I stopped this quickly, because the warnings were driving me crazy. Now, I just check from time to time, and Hogwarts only reports very unusual circumstances. The last time the alarm went off, it was last night, and the castle told me there was a fight going on, yet it only showed me the image of a prone Severus next to a frozen cauldron. Which, visibly, had been ready to explode, or worse, judging by its overflowing state.”

“Why did you say we had to organize a search?” asked Sprout after a few seconds of silence, bringing the topic back on its primary track.

“It seems that Hogwarts can't find him.” answered Dumbledore.

“Hogwarts can't find him?” asked McGonagall. “Or Hogwarts can't find him?”

The aged Headmaster removed his glasses, and pinched his nose bridge, before answering. "I'd be more correct in saying that Hogwarts won't tell me about him. It's as if I never had such student in the castle."

There was a long pause, during which each of them reflected about the missing student.

McGonagall was the first to speak up, turning toward her colleagues. "You know... I still have the dented sink in my office."

"Dented sink?" asked Dumbledore, not understanding how such an object had a place in their conversation.

"During last Halloween, four students got trapped by a troll in the girl's bathroom," started McGonagall. "I mean... the two boys told us they had tried to save the girls from the creature."

"I remember, you told me about it."

"When we cleaned the mess, we found a sink with a footprint on it."

"What does it have to do? People can walk on sinks as they wish, if they want to escape such a violent creature."

"The footprint was embedded in the sink, Albus. Two inches deep in a strong metal."

The shocked Headmaster didn't answer, trying to picture the item.

McGonagall wasn't finished, though. "There is still the fact that they didn't escape the troll. They killed it. Reportedly by levitating the creature's club over its head and dropping it."

"And?"

"I'm not sure that this scenario actually happened. It's too late now to examine the body, but that type of creature has rather strong

bones, and I doubt that merely dropping a wooden club by a couple of feet could have killed it.”

She paused for several seconds, during which everyone thought about it.

“I think we can ask his close friends about his whereabouts.” said Sprout. “The strange thing is, his closest friends seem to be in other Houses. In fact, he, the Weasley boy from Gryffindor and the Granger girl from Ravenclaw seem to have mounted a study group, and I have heard rumours that the Slytherins did the same around the Davis girl.”

“And Thomson and Davis were together during the attack.” muttered Dumbledore. Seeing the questioning gaze coming from the Hufflepuff Head, he motioned her to continue her story.

“The four of them had been in the toilet during the troll incident.” She thought about it a bit more, and concluded. “Perhaps that’s why he asked for an inter-Houses common room. His friends being in other Houses, I mean.”

They all nodded thoughtfully, and the nearby clock on the mantelpiece chimed the hour in an otherwise silent room.

As the meeting proper was finished, Dumbledore and the three Heads of House decided to conjure several aerial servants to search the castle. The spell created an obedient transparent creature, invisible if not moving, which could speak and understand simple sentence. The ten creatures summoned in that manner were given the task of searching the whole castle to find Harold Thomson, reporting to their caster afterwards.

In the morning, the creatures returned to their owners and informed them of their lack of success. Harold seemed to have vanished.

That morning, on her way to the Great Hall, a young and solitary girl found an empty diary in a deserted corridor and, noticing no one in the vicinity, stored it in her schoolbag.

Much later...

A hand appeared in the debris of a white building, pushing rubble out of the way. The hand was quickly followed by an arm and a whole body, dirty and exhausted.

“At last, I see the light.” Harry said in his own mind. The dragons had long since disappeared, their energy sucked away by the mind’s lack of sustenance. Now that he was "outside", Harry could conjure construction tools, and he spend a few hours reconstructing his fake consciousness building, essential for him to move and interact with the outside world. He didn’t have time to build more, though, as he was famished. He made contact with the outside world and noticed immediately that he hadn’t moved from where he had been: the gaseous reality, in the potion lab.

The cauldron hadn’t moved either, and Harry had the faint inkling that Snape may not have awoken from Voldemort’s forcefully-ended possession.

He didn’t have time to ponder this, though, and quickly exited the potion lab and classroom, passing through the doors. He reconnected to Cassie, who swamped him with pictures in joy. A meeting of teachers. Strange transparent creatures moving around. Snape lying on a bed in the infirmary...

Holding his head in pain, he asked for the kitchens, and Apparated there directly immediately upon receiving the room’s location. The house-elves were surprised to see him but, to their credit, didn’t ask any question about it.

“Can I have some food, please?” he asked to the first one he succeeded in grabbing. “I’m starving.”

“Yes student-sir.” the small creature answered. “Cooky fetching you something.”

Directed by the house elf, he sat at a nearby table, and several dishes appeared. Harry quickly dug into them, only stopping to ask something.

“Whi’ ‘ay are we?”

“Cooky not understanding sir. You’s speaking with a full mouth.”

Harry swallowed his mouthful and asked again. “Which day are we?”

The elf looked at him inquiringly, before answering. “Today’s January 22nd, student-sir.”

So, two weeks had passed, he thought. “Call me Harry, please.” he said absently, before asking another question. “And what time is it?”

The elf told him it was late at night already, the curfew passed two hours ago. There was still the Astronomy lesson at midnight, Harry reflected, but he’d rather make sure that Snape was alright... or not. Judging from the images Cassie had sent him, the man mustn’t have moved out of the infirmary yet.

After downing a dozen sandwiches and the same number of glasses of pumpkin juice, he thanked the house-elf and exited the kitchens. Once out, he Apparated out and went to the Hospital Wing. Once beside Snape’s bed, he took advantage of the man’s prone state and carefully entered his mind.

Snape’s mind was still looking like a bunker, but the dark shroud was gone. ‘Good thing.’ Harry thought. ‘It surely means that Voldemort doesn’t possess him anymore.’

He took a tentative step forward, then another. The lack of reaction confirmed his insight, and he pressed forward. Snape’s mind defence still looked like a blockhaus, with no visible openings, and stone-hard walls and ceilings. Levitating above the construction, he unsuccessfully searched a way in, before deciding to continue his initial work of digging under the man’s defences.

With the help of conjured tools, it still took him four hours to dig a tunnel going under the massive walls, and he finally found himself in a darkened place. As he couldn’t see anything, he conjured a

flashlight and discovered that he was on the side of a large courtyard, with the usual memories floating around. Several creatures were there too, but they seemed frozen, in a kind of stasis.

Harry had a vague idea about why they didn't move, and headed for the man's consciousness building. He stopped on the way, though, shocked to see that the man didn't have one silo, but two, the second seeming more recent in build. He shook himself awake, and reflected that it must have been Voldemort's work.

He stopped just at the building's massive doors, and decided that, should Snape see him, he'd better display another face, or his cover would be blown. Harry wouldn't change the man's memories, as someone like Snape would certainly notice the smallest change in his mind. He called for his powers, unsure of whether they would work in this environment. He felt relieved upon feeling the usual tingle of his face melting into someone else's.

Entering the building, his previous idea was confirmed, as he saw a tied and gagged body on the side. The tied man looked pretty much like Snape, but without the greasy hair and the usual scowl. Harry silently pondered about it, before going to the man's side.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

Snape looked at him with wide eyes, before rolling them. Of course, he wasn't alright!

Harry delicately removed the gag and ties around the man's body, and Snape massaged his limp limbs.

"Did you catch him, Albus?" he asked with a croaking voice.

Harry took a moment to understand that the question was addressed to him. In his hurry to take another's appearance, he hadn't really thought about it, and had taken his Headmaster's exterior. Hiding a wide smile, he answered.

"Who?"

“Voldemort!” Snape huffed, rolling his eyes again.

“Oh. Him. Well... we don’t know about him yet.” He concentrated a bit, but couldn’t reach Cassie from the place he was in, and shrugged. “Rest, now. I’ll be back later.”

“Albus, wait!” Snape reached out weakly. “What are you doing here? I mean... How did you...”

Harry looked at the feeble man’s consciousness, and smiled. “That’s one story for another day.”

He then left the man to wonder about it, before leaving the mind through the same way he got in, being careful to hide the traces of him ever having been there.

Once out, he reverted to his usual form, before frowning.

‘One down. How many to go, now?’ he thought, thinking of Snape as Voldemort’s possession victim. ‘At the very least, I’ll have to inform my friends about it.’

As the next day was a Thursday, without morning courses thanks to the nightly Astronomy period, he decided that he could talk to his friends in the morning, rather than wake them up in the middle of the night. He also had to rebuild Harold Thomson’s whole mind before being seen in public. He thus Apparated in front of the Room of Requirements, and opened its door while requiring a room with a lit fireplace, comfortable chairs, and a clock.

He spent the few remaining hours before sunrise in deep meditation, reconstructing the false memories and identity of Harold Thomson, taking care to reinforce the consciousness building with a thick stone layer reinforced by steel.

The next day, several people got a surprise, and some people got more than one.

Madam Pomfrey was the first surprised, as she usually woke up before everyone else, especially when she had to take care of people staying in her territory. Running her usual diagnostic spells on the prone teacher, she was shocked to see that there had been a big change overnight. The man was awake.

“Poppy...” he croaked, before being silenced by a glass of water pressed on his lips. Without letting him thank her, the Healer gave him two other vials, containing sustaining, energizing, and calming potions – Snape would later hate her for that last one.

As he was digesting those, she placed a firecall to the Headmaster, informing him of the Potion Master’s revival. Said Headmaster quickly appeared at the infirmary’s doors and went to the bed.

“How are you doing, Severus?” he asked.

“Better, thanks to you.” was the weak reply.

The other two looked at each other.

“What do you mean?” Dumbledore asked again.

Snape looked at him. “You don’t remember freeing me from my own mind?”

The old man was clearly shocked, now. “Severus, I assure you that I haven’t been able to enter your mind for a long time.”

A pause ensued, before Snape spoke again.

“If it wasn’t you, he sure had your appearance.” muttered the Potion Master.

Another long pause followed, which Dumbledore broke again.

“What happened?”

Snape frowned. "I got possessed, Headmaster. Apparently, it took him a long time to go over my defences, but I haven't been myself between Halloween and now. I'm glad that he's gone."

"Who are you talking about?" asked Pomfrey.

"Voldemort." whispered Snape, thus creating an ominous silence in the room.

After several seconds, Dumbledore spoke again. "Was he the person impersonating me?"

"Of course not." Snape snorted. "He's too proud to assume someone else's features. And I don't think he could have. Only a metamorphagus..." he trailed off, falling in thoughts again.

"So, what you suggest is that a powerful Legilimens, who happens to have metamorphagus abilities as well, entered your mind and freed you from Voldemort." stated Dumbledore.

"I know it sounds weird, but it looks like it." confirmed the Potion Master. "I don't know if he freed me from Voldemort, as that particular episode happened a few days ago. He sure as hell freed me from the mental binds put on me by Voldemort. For all I know, though, it could very well be the same person."

"Who could it be, Albus?" enquired Pomfrey. "Who could have that power?"

The addressed Headmaster didn't answer, lost in his own thoughts, and the silence emanating from him was ominous at best.

After a long pause, Snape frowned, and spoke up. "Speaking about power, Albus, I have something strange in my mind."

"What is it, Severus?"

“I think it’s linked with what Voldemort did while in my body. I have only fuzzy memories about it. The only thing I know is that it’s linked with something you did during the Christmas holidays.”

Dumbledore frowned a second, and his eyes opened wide. He looked at his Potion Master as if he held something precious in his hands. “You don’t mean...”

“My mind has two reserves of power, Albus. I can only guess that one of them isn’t mine and, judging from your reaction and whatever memories I have of that event, it might well be yours.”

“Albus! You don’t want to deplete the poor man’s magical reserve, do you?” asked Pomfrey. “He is in dire need of it right now.”

“Don’t worry, Poppy.” said Snape. “The additional reserve had been made by and for someone else, and I can’t access it anyways.”

“Why didn’t he use it, then?” asked Dumbledore. “Or better, yet, why didn’t he leave with it when he exited your mind?”

“I don’t know.” replied the Potion Master. “I guess that he didn’t think he would need it. I remember being touched through Legilimency, but the feeling left quickly, and Voldemort followed the intruder. He must have found someone stronger than himself.” He frowned upon his last words, and muttered “I never thought I’d say this someday.”

The three of them stayed silent for a while.

“So, Albus,” started Snape, breaking the stillness again, “do you want that reserve back now?”

“If you don’t mind, Severus, that would surely help my old body up.”

The Potion Master smiled, his normal sneer diminished by the calming draught. “Come get it, then.”

The two of them got into position, while the Hospital Matron prepared herself in case anything went wrong. The aged Headmaster aimed

his wand at Snape's forehead, while the younger man concentrated on moving the additional reserve out of his defences.

“Legilimens.”

The next surprised people were Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley, who got a mind call from Harry as soon as they woke up. Following their friend's directions, they gingerly went to the Room of Requirements.

Once there, they found a frowning Harry, on whom they lunged.

“Where were you, mate?” said Ron. “We thought you disappeared.”

“You worried us, Harry. And the teachers were in a right state, too. With Snape unconscious and all...” said Hermione at the same time.

Harry acknowledged the three-way hug, patting their backs as well, before separating.

“I'll tell you,” he started, “but I've yet to find Tracey. I haven't been able to contact her yet.”

“Tracey?” wondered Hermione, sharing a worried look with Ron.

“Err... Harry?” he asked. “Tracey seems to have separated from us.”

“She hadn't sought us for two weeks, now.” confirmed Hermione. “Since your disappearance, in fact. And there's no way we could have gone into Slytherin's common room to fetch her either. Flint takes at heart his job of protecting her, even against us.”

“Speaking of the snakes,” Ron continued, “there is another strange one. Malfoy seems to constantly be on edge. He speaks strange things out of turn, and lost so many points that even his house mates look at him worriedly. Even Crabbe and Goyle have deserted him.”

Harry smiled. "This one, I can understand." Ignoring the curious gazes his friends threw him, he continued. "I'm more interested in Tracey, though. I guess I'll check in the Great Hall."

"It could be a problem." Hermione stated. "She doesn't seem to eat with us anymore."

"I'll see her in her House, then." Harry answered grimly, standing up.

The two others looked at each other. That promised trouble for anyone daring to block the determined boy.

An hour afterwards, the still determined boy went to the Library where his two friends had relocated, and sat down heavily.

"No luck?" asked Ron, restraining from showing how happy he was to escape the boring book.

"No." Harry answered. "I checked her dorm, the usual classrooms, Snape's quarters, outside, the girls' toilets, but I couldn't find her."

Hermione looked at him suspiciously. "How could you enter all these places, Harry? Honestly, the girls' toilets!"

Harry blushed and looked down. "Well... there are several things I haven't told you yet."

Ron elbowed Hermione gently, before addressing him. "It's not a bother, mate. We're not prying."

"Thanks, mate." Harry smiled, before remembering something. "Hey, you know, I even went to the second floor toilets, you know? The one which is out of service."

"Yes, and?"

"Tracey wasn't here, but I found someone else there. It seems that the toilets are out of service thanks to a ghost, named Myrtle. She complained that nobody was coming to see her, and I answered that

if she constantly blocked the plumbing, it was normal. We chatted a bit, and she told me that she was a student here, and she died in the very toilets she was haunting. As she didn't have any visible wound, I asked her how, and you know what she answered?"

The other two were following the story with wide eyes, and shook their head.

"She told me it was a snake! She looked out of her stall, and noticed a huge snake coming out of the sinks. When the animal noticed her, it looked at her and she died."

"What did you say then?" asked Ron, while Hermione was sitting back, deep in thoughts.

"I told her that it wasn't possible, and she yelled at me, before making all the toilets overflow."

"Actually, Harry, it is possible." said Hermione reflectively. Seeing the boys' surprised gaze, she huffed. "What? You didn't think I'd be able to dig information about what you told us earlier?"

"What do you mean?" asked Harry.

"I mean that I looked up the creature you told us about. A Basilisk is a very powerful snake, able to kill its prey by simply looking it directly in the eye. It's also named the king of snakes."

She was continuing to talk, but Harry wasn't listening anymore, reeling under the revelation. A memory shot forward in his mind. A memory of a dream, where a voice had told him to get glasses for the king of snakes.

Noticing Hermione's annoyed gaze, he shook himself awake. "What did you say? I just remembered something when you spoke about the king of snakes."

“I said that I read the newspapers from 50 years ago. Remember? And I found something about the Chamber incident. The name Myrtle was somewhat familiar.”

“What about her?”

“Fifty years ago,” started Hermione, using her professor-like voice, “the Chamber of Secrets was opened, reportedly by the Heir of Slytherin. It is said to be a place inside Hogwarts, where Slytherin himself held his private quarters. Several muggleborn students were targeted by strange attacks which turned them into stone statues, and a student called Myrtle Stevenson died inexplicably. The school almost closed, but they caught someone and expelled him, after snapping his wand. The newspapers said that there were no more attacks afterwards and that was the proof of the accused student’s guilt.”

“Who was the culprit?” asked Harry.

Hermione looked at him for a second, before answering. “Hagrid.”

They thought about it for several seconds, before Ron spoke up. “Can you imagine Hagrid handling a Basilisk?”

They looked at each other.

“No.” stated Harry, summing up their thoughts.

As it was lunchtime already, they left the Library and headed for the Great Hall, discussing about their conclusions. It didn’t cross their mind that they should have thought about the probable reaction to his presence.

“HAROLD!” shrieked Susan Bones, who jumped from her place at the Hufflepuff table, lunging toward him afterwards.

“Uh oh.” Harry had the time to say, before the girl hugged him, her momentum pulling them both on the floor.

A few seconds later, an amused face wearing many wrinkles and a white beard looked down on them. "I think we should meet in my office, Mr Thomson." stated Dumbledore. "I'll leave you eat here before, though." For some reason, the old man looked more alive than the last time he remembered him.

"Thank you, sir." Harry tried to say from under Susan. "Err... Susan? Can you get up, please?"

The girl looked around her and, noticing their position and the numerous witnesses, blushed a deep red before standing up.

During the rest of the meal, Harry received a few miscellaneous news pieces about the school, thus learning of Hufflepuff's defeat in Quidditch. Most of the time, though, he was flooded with an uncomfortable jumble of questions, coming from almost everyone in his House, as well as other first year students from other Houses. As he couldn't answer them truthfully, he spent most of his time dodging them. It gave him ideas about what the Headmaster could ask him, though, and concentrated on building a believable lie for his two weeks of absence.

It was a difficult task.

To be continued in next chapter: Of Snakes And Birds...

You suspect what will happen.
I'll tell you for once and now:
Issues will be forced open
While others won't, you'll know.

Chapter 13 – Of Snakes And Birds

posted September 11th, 2005

Harry exited the Great Hall after lunch, heading to the Headmaster's office. On the way, he found himself in an unused corridor and concentrated, using his shape-altering abilities to further enhance the viability of the lies he was about to tell. A short time later, he found himself in front of the stone gargoyle once again, and it sprang aside automatically. Climbing the stairs, he knocked at the door and waited for the Headmaster's invitation to enter the cluttered office. He immediately noticed five stern faces looking his way, and recognized the trouble it announced.

'Uh oh.' he repeated in his mind, for the second time of the day. 'It seems that, for today's show, the audience isn't cooperative, yet.'

He smiled timidly and, following Dumbledore's gesture, sat on the remaining seat, conveniently placed in the middle of the teachers' chairs.

"So, Harold," started the Headmaster, his blue eyes twinkling in his otherwise serious face, "can you tell us where you were during the last two weeks?"

Harry took a deep breath.

"Headmaster, Professors, I wish to ask forgiveness for having left the castle, especially at night. When I came back from Astronomy, I found the castle doors open, and couldn't help looking outside." He knew it was true, as he had remarked Filch closing them angrily, grumbling about an unkempt half-giant. "I saw somebody near the Forbidden Forest. I thought it was Susan, because the person looked like her. She likes nature, you know, and wondered several times why the Forbidden Forest was forbidden. As she left the Astronomy period before me, I thought she had taken a stroll outside." Apart from the fact that he hadn't seen anyone there that night, everything was true, and Sprout nodded along.

One point.

“I don’t remember what I thought exactly, but I couldn’t very well leave Susan outside at that time of the night, it could be dangerous.” he shuddered, playing his act to the perfection. “However, when I reached the place where I had seen her, she had disappeared inside the forest. I called her name several times, but nobody answered.”

“What did you do?” asked McGonagall.

“I was hesitating between going after her and going back to the castle. It was very dark outside and I was afraid, so I tried to return to the castle, but the doors closed before I reached them. As I was already out of limits, I gathered whatever courage I could muster and followed Susan in the woods.”

Despite abiding to the rules and finding that the whole excursion had been unnecessary, McGonagall recognized a bravery befitting a Gryffindor, and she nodded.

Two points.

“She wasn’t moving fast, but always was ahead of me, whatever speed I went. I followed for a very long time, until she stopped in the middle of a clearing. I had walked easily a couple of hours at that moment, and I was quite tired, but also curious. Why would she lead me that far in the woods?”

“Why indeed?” asked Snape.

“I was ready to ask her the question, but she suddenly disappeared with a sound like when someone uncorks a bottle.”

“Apparation.” commented the Potion Master dryly.

“What is it?” asked Harry innocently.

“It’s a magical mean of transportation.” replied Dumbledore. “What happened next?”

“It’s kind of blurry, sir. I tried to return to the school, but quickly found myself lost. I walked for a long time, several days, in fact, always keeping away from the strange noises of the forest, as I still was afraid. I remember being so tired that I once slept on a tree branch. I knew I was lost, but I thought that, by walking always in the direction of the morning sun, I’d stumble on something. I continued to walk for two days, eating fruits on the way, until I stumbled upon someone.”

“Who?” asked McGonagall and Snape at the same time.

“I don’t remember. He was an old man, with a hunting rifle.”

“A raifel?” Flitwick asked.

“Rifle. It’s a muggle gun. It throws... never mind.” said Harry, seeing their lost expressions. “Anyways, he laughed at my attire, joking about Halloween and things like that – I don’t remember well. When he found that I was exhausted, he helped me to the local hospital. I had caught a severe pneumonia by then, got myself too close to brambles, and my legs had boils due to a bush of bubotuber that I hadn’t seen in the dark.”

He raised his pant legs a bit, showing scars of boils and scratches. Sprout nodded, appreciative of her student’s knowledge in Herbology.

Three points.

“I spent a few days in the hospital and, when I was almost healed, they tried to find out who I was and what I was doing alone in the woods. I think they were searching for hints for the social services, and I didn’t want to be locked in by muggles so I took advantage of a night to escape. Despite the horrendous food, I was up and about, and quickly found my cleaned clothes and my wand in one of the hospital’s cupboards near my room.”

Snape nodded, approving the boy’s cunning sense and stealth, true Slytherin attributes.

Four points.

“I managed to escape the place undetected,” continued Harry, “and proceeded to follow the plan I made while resting in the drab hospital bed.”

The teachers grinned more or less openly. Each of them had experienced, one day or another, the monotony of hospital beds, the latest being Snape.

“Even if I went through it once,” Harry was saying, “I wasn’t ready to cross the forest again, and I took the Knight Bus to Hogsmeade, from where I entered the castle this morning.”

The Knight Bus was a magical transportation device which appeared when a wizard or a witch raised one’s wand in the same way as a muggle would raise his hand to call a taxi. For a small fee, it would then bring the passenger to almost every wizarding place in Britain. Harry knew about the Knight Bus thanks to some stories he had heard from Ron earlier in the year, and he had fetched its description from the boy’s mind during the meal. It was also a big gamble because he didn’t know if said bus had a register in it.

The teachers were silent for a long time, digesting the information. As the silence was beginning to wear on his nerves, Harry spoke again. “I met my friends this morning, to exchange news about myself and about the school. I guess I hadn’t met all of them, judging from Susan’s reaction at lunch.”

The teachers smiled at the reminiscence, and he grinned too, before continuing. “I guess it wasn’t Susan in the woods, then. I’m sorry to have caused problems. I’m ready to whatever punishment you’ll give me, but please don’t remove points. My housemates aren’t responsible for my attitude.”

He then stopped, waiting for their decision with baited breath. Of course, he could have gone into their minds and wriggled himself free, but he believed that, like Snape, each of them had impressive mind barriers, and he didn’t have time to wipe the five of them in one go.

“Well...” started Dumbledore. “That’s sure an interesting tale.”

“Tale, sir?” asked Harry. The term often meant "lie" in the muggle world, especially in that context.

The Headmaster smiled benignly. “Don’t worry. I’m just going to see if I can find hints about where you were, in case there are people to see... for them to forget you even went there, you understand?”

“Like, the Obliviators, sir?” asked Harry with as much respect he could gather in his voice.

Dumbledore chuckled. “I guess your friends have informed you of that particular wizard job. Yes. We have to maintain a level of Secrecy with the muggles, and if people witnessed you, it’s my duty to... reorganize their memories.”

“With all due respect, sir, why don’t we have a general course in wizarding laws and the like, especially for us muggleborns who don’t have any clue of the wizarding world in general? It’s not like our first-year schedule is that full. I have memories of muggle school’s schedules packed tighter.”

The four Heads were shocked to see the meek student stand up so harshly against his school curriculum, but the Headmaster, after his initial shock, smiled widely.

“It’s a very good idea, Harold! I’ll put it to the vote. I’m sorry about your other ideas, though. The Board of Governors didn’t seem to find interesting the idea of an inter-houses common room. The Board’s Head was especially vocal against the issue.”

“I’d say the same about the Board itself than what I said earlier. I don’t know how it functions, or who is in it. Who is the person you are talking about, sir?” asked Harry.

Despite Snape’s snort, Dumbledore answered. “It’s Mr Malfoy. Lucius Malfoy, father of young Draco who is a Slytherin in your year.”

“Thank you for the information, sir. What did you want from me to be able to reach the persons you want to Obliviate?”

The Headmaster smiled. The boy obviously knew how to navigate in a discussion, seeing how he had brought the topic back on its track. “If you’ll allow me, I’m going to examine your memories of the last fifteen days to check if I have to intervene or not. You’ll only have to think hard about the last fortnight.”

Harry understood that the “if you’ll allow me” part was just politeness, but he accepted nonetheless. After Voldemort’s findings a fortnight ago, this was the major test of his mind faking abilities. He pushed his fake memories forward, and witnessed the aged wizard’s intrusion from his hidden mind.

After a few minutes, Dumbledore extracted himself from the boy’s mind, and smiled. “Well, it seems that everything is in order. Thank you for your time, Harold. I think you have a class to prepare for, now.”

“Oh yes, sir. I will work hard to recover my previous level in studies, sir.”

“I do hope so. If the other Professors here agree, I’ll deem this a sufficient enough workload to be your actual punishment.”

The four other adults nodded their agreement, the last one being Snape, unsurprisingly. Harry thanked them all profusely, before darting out, internally screaming his victory.

However, as soon as he was out, Dumbledore frowned.

“What is it, Albus?” asked McGonagall.

“Nothing much.” A pause. “It’s quite strange, actually. Whenever we speak about him, nothing much stands out of the ordinary. I mean – no offence, Pomona – he’s the proverbial Hufflepuff, loyal to a fault.

But he strangely has friends in all Houses and displays Gryffindor and even Slytherin tendencies.”

His Deputy Headmistress knew him enough to discern something else bothering him. “And...?” she prodded.

“And his mind is clean.” he said.

“Clean?” asked Snape.

“Yes. Clean. Not your usual ten-year old mind with pebbles of useless memories hovering around.” Snape understood what he meant, but the other three, not having the slightest training in Legilimency, failed to do so. Dumbledore continued in another thought avenue. “His memories were exactly the same as what he told us, but I couldn’t see a face or recognize a location.”

The Potion Master was thoughtful. It was a look Dumbledore had learned to identify a long time ago.

“Severus?”

“I just remembered something, Albus.” he answered, stopping at that.

“What is it?” asked Flitwick.

“It’s about the boy.” Snape continued, but fell silent again.

Sprout frowned at him. “Come on, Severus. What is it about him?”

“You will all hate me.”

McGonagall huffed. “More than we already do? Come on, you are quite the unfair one speaking about giving and taking House points. We all know about it, and adjusted our ways to yours.”

The Potion Master looked at her with wide eyes.

“What?” she asked innocently. “With old age, we come to experiment attitudes from the other side, you know? “Think outside the box,” as the Muggles say. Now, what did you do?”

Snape was too flabbergasted to think twice about what he was saying. “I Obliviated him.”

“YOU WHAT?” screamed Sprout, making the man wince, instantly regretting his lapse. “You Obliviated one of my students?”

Dumbledore, sensing an imminent fight, raised his hands to appease the atmosphere. “I think that, rather than jump to each other’s throats, we should wait for Severus to explain everything. Now that he has confessed the act, he could as well retell its causes and effects.”

The Potion Master looked relieved that Dumbledore had interceded for him, but the elder man’s stern look reminded him that his action was still frowned upon.

“Thank you, Albus. It all happened before that accursed Halloween...”

“Don’t try to find excuses.” growled Sprout, who, when defending her House, could be as dangerous as a cornered badger. The animal was, incidentally, the emblem of Hufflepuff.

Snape gulped, before continuing at a faster pace. “Well, I was quizzing them... I mean... him... and he answered with a rudeness which got to me.”

“He was right, you mean?” Flitwick piped in.

Snape’s pale face took a rosy tinge, and the others looked at him in wonder. Snape? Blushing?

“Yes!” he barked. “Satisfied?” he asked in a more normal tone. “To make a long story short, I was out of my mind and asked him to go see you, Headmaster.”

“Yes. I remember about that visit, yes.” said Albus. “What did you do?”

“Well... I accompanied him, and Obliviated him in the corridor.”

The silent was ominous.

“You have to understand!” he said in a weak attempt to defend himself. “I couldn’t let him be that rude in his answers and boast about it, so I removed his memories.”

“Only the answers?” asked the diminutive Head of Ravenclaw, who, seeing the confused look on his colleague’s face, elaborated. “Did you only Oblivate his recent actions or more than that?”

Snape blushed, and muttered something unintelligible.

“What?” asked Sprout. “We can’t hear you.”

“I said that I probably went overboard.” said the Slytherin defiantly.

“Now, now.” Dumbledore intervened. “We can’t fight about the causes now. It would take young Harold to press charges to do so.”

“But Albus, if he has been Obliviated, he can’t!” protested Sprout.

Snape snorted, something which earned him an immediate glare from the irate Hufflepuff.

“What happened then, Severus?” asked the Headmaster.

“I thought it worked, because he seemed lost, and I left him. But in hindsight, I think it was a play. Tell me, Albus, when you saw him, did you notice anything out of the ordinary?”

Dumbledore reflected a second before shaking his wizened head. “No. He explained you kicked him out and we chatted a bit. Cornelius was here, too.”

“And he came back in class, and took his place as if nothing had happened.” continued Snape.

“Excuse me,” started Flitwick, “when did you say you gave him the password to Albus’ office? Before or after the... the spell?”

That got Snape thinking, and he looked up after a few seconds. “Now that you ask, I don’t remember giving it to him.”

“Has anyone given the boy the password?” asked Flitwick.

They all thought about it, and Sprout’s eyes lit up. “I did! I remember that he went to my office to get the directions to the office and I gave him the password as well. It changed several times between now and then, however.” she finished, looking thoughtful.

“To sum things up,” started Flitwick, “we have a first-year Hufflepuff student named Harold Thomson who appears to be immune to Severus’ Obliviation, doesn’t seem interested by House divisions, disappears for a fortnight and comes back with a believable story, but without precise detail, even in his own memory. He belongs to a group of people who are suspected to have dented a metal sink with a mere foot, and, according to what you told us some time ago, Albus, he appeared on a battlefield where supposedly dark wizard killed dozens of muggles before being pushed away by an unknown spell. And he doesn’t appear to need the password to enter your office.” he finished, looking at the Headmaster. “Is that all?”

After a shocked silence, McGonagall nodded. “You summed it up pretty well, Filius.”

Dumbledore was frowning, reflecting on Flitwick’s words, and he suddenly grasped his medallion, concentrating on something. After a second, his hand dropped to his lap and he took a deep breath.

“What is it, Albus?” asked McGonagall.

She had to repeat her question, as the old man hadn't heard it the first time.

"Filius," he answered indirectly, "you can add to your description that the boy isn't visible."

Snape snorted. "Surely, the boy isn't invisible, Albus..."

His sentence stopped short, though, because the three others were looking at the Headmaster in apprehension. The Potion Master addressed him.

"What do you mean?"

"I know where is everybody in the castle, Severus," replied Dumbledore, "but not him."

The silence afterwards spoke volumes.

Even with all the secret passages he knew, Filius Flitwick arrived late in his Charms classroom, his mind still reeling with the revelations concerning young Harold Thomson. The boy was an unknown quantity, and he couldn't wait to have him in his classroom to test his abilities further.

The diminutive teacher spent the whole lesson on autopilot, discoursing about cleaning charms for a solid hour. He didn't think to call the roll, and thus failed to notice the absence of several students. Ronald Weasley did notice, though, and it disturbed him greatly. Ron wasn't exceptional in his studies, but was a penniless pureblood, which meant he had been able to do magic, under his parents' guidance, but didn't have house-elves. He had thus had his share of cleaning charms, and didn't need the additional lesson, which he spent wondering about where Tracey was.

At the same moment, in the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom on the first floor, Harry and his fellow Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws were having their weekly practical lesson in the subject.

“I have had ze luck,” their teacher was saying, “to find zis crate being hauled by ze caretaker.” she said, indicating said crate with her wand. “It contains a very special creature which we will study today. Zis creature feeds on a certain category of emotions, and will go through great length to instil it. It’s fear. Its most notable action in zat regard is zat it takes ze appearance of one’s greatest fear. Who knows what zat creature is?”

Several hands raised, most of them belonging to Ravenclaws. Harry looked at Hermione, smiling and reflecting that the bushy-haired young witch was in her element. Eventually, Professor Fortin selected Lisa Turpin to answer the question, and she correctly gave the creature its name.

“Zat is correct.” confirmed the teacher. “Zis is a boggart. We are studying it today because its ability to inspire fear isn’t a defence mechanism but a kind of attack, classifying it as a Dark creature, like ze pogrebins we studied last week. Now, you will face ze boggart, one after ze ozer, and you will use ze Riddikulus spell to defeat it. Ze Riddikulus spell is mostly used as a practical joke, because it gives something or someone a ridiculous aspect.” She suddenly became serious, raising her index finger for emphasis. “And I don’t want to ’ear about someone using it outside of zis classroom!” she threatened, although the twinkle in her eyes told otherwise. She demonstrated the wand movement for the spell and lined them in front of the crate.

“Hannah Abbott.”

When the called girl advanced, already shivering in fright, the teacher kicked the crate open, and an obese human-shaped creature got out of it. The students could only look at it in awe, as it was Hannah herself, but the pink-faced imitation was graced with several hundreds of pounds of flesh. Hannah herself was shivering and the teacher, after reminding her to use the spell twice, decided to cast it for her.

“Riddikulus.”

The false Hannah farted violently, and Hannah, surprised, started to smile at her double's hesitant stance. When she started to laugh about it, the boggart recoiled and returned in the crate, slamming its cover over its head. How the obese imitation could have exited the crate and then entered it was beyond anyone's understanding, but, hey, it's magic.

"'Ave you understood?" the teacher reminded them, breaking the mood. "Use Riddikulus, and you'll be fine. After you pass, I'll give you a bit of chocolate. It 'elps to deal with after-effects of fear."

She paused for a second, glancing at the list of students.

"Susan Bones."

Susan Bones threw a meaningful look at Harry, before straightening, her wand firmly held in an otherwise rather shaky hand. The boggart shot up, and several students drew a sharp intake of breath. Like in Hannah's case, it was a student, but unlike Hannah, it wasn't herself. It was Harry, and he was lying on the ground, blood seeping from several wounds. In a shaky voice, Susan said the spell, and the boggart started an inspired tap-dance before being forced to retreat in his crate under the students' laughs. After taking a lump of chocolate from the thoughtful professor, the girl went to Harry and hugged him for a long time.

Terry Boot's fear was a ferocious-looking lion which mewed like a kitten when the spell was cast.

Mandy Brocklehurst's fear made the boys look at each other in puzzlement, while most of the girls tittered to themselves. The only two ones not to burst in giggles, sharing a nervous look instead, were Hermione and Padma. It was a pair of knickers with blood dripping from them. The ridiculing spell created an unidentifiable boy who put them on his head, adding socks in the holes to create the flapping ears of a dog's disguise.

The students passed, one after the others, most of them successful in the casting of the required spell. In the few cases where the student

was too taken by his or her fear, the teacher did it instead, and gave them a double dose of chocolate. Most of the fears were related to wildlife creatures, such as snakes, bears, and other large animals. Some of them involved humans in unusual situations, and only a couple of them included objects, including, in Hermione's case, an exam report full of Pitiful marks. When Harry's turn came by, though, the class reacted with a startled silence, as nothing came from the crate.

Sensing the class' uneasiness, but more importantly, sensing the invading presence in his mind, presence which searched for a memory labelled "worst fear," Harry created that memory on the fly, and Snape suddenly rose from the crate.

"Riddikulus." intoned Harry, and the infamous teacher found himself clothed in only one garment: a rather fetching set of pink underwear. The roar of laughter was so strong that the boggart's hasty retreat caused the crate to move back a few feet.

Turning to the professor, Harry had the surprise to see a still laughing expression turned toward him. She quickly calmed, though, and, after giving him the customary bit of chocolate, she looked at him inquiringly. Her attention was driven somewhere else, though, as Lisa Turpin, the last student on the Hufflepuff-Ravenclaw roll, had advanced bravely. Once again, the boggart assumed a wounded person's appearance, and Professor Fortin had to intervene to ridicule the dark creature and to soothe the poor girl.

After everyone had passed, she told them generalities about Dark creatures, how to detect them, and how to fight them. When the bell announced the lesson end, she tried to find Harry in the group of students who had stood suddenly, heading for the door, but she failed. The boy had practically disappeared. In a place not that far away...

"Fools!" the man yelled, although Peter Pettigrew's voice hadn't lost its whining tone. It was quite a sight, then, for the man's usual retinue. They had been forced to acknowledge the change once again, and now the little man was ordering them to find his previous host.

“My Lord,” started Lucius Malfoy, “we have had reports that Snape had awoken.”

“It can’t be! I bound his mind!” Voldemort shrilled. “Gah! And this stupid shape gets on my nerves! Why did I have to get Pettigrew’s?”

Malfoy suspected the question was a rhetoric one and knew better than to answer it. He still had his report to finish, though. “My contacts have assured me of their truthfulness, Master.”

“Everyone can be turned! You are a fool, Lucius. All of you are. Crucio! Crucio! CRUCIO!”

The vision ended, leaving Harry on the ground, panting, pressing both his hands on his throbbing forehead in pain. Contrarily to the few visions in blue or red he was still having occasionally, that one didn’t have any colour shift, and Harry had the faint idea that it was a vision of the present. Thankfully, he had been in a rather empty corridor, and nobody had seen his diminished state. Feeling the pain ebbing away, he stood up, still breathing heavily, and headed toward his dorm. After a few steps, he noticed that his hands were sticky and brought them to the light.

Shocked, he stopped walking.

They were covered in blood.

‘What is going on?’ he worriedly enquired to himself.

He tried to hide this from the few students he crossed in the corridors, and even snarled viciously at the ones bold enough to ask him if he was alright.

Once in the safety of his dormitory’s bathroom, he checked himself on the mirror, and noticed that his face was covered in blood. After washing it, he also became aware that he didn’t look the same as before, having unknowingly reverted back to Harry Potter’s appearance. It had been a stroke of luck for him not to cross his dorm

mates in the way. The only ones he had crossed had been Slytherins heading to their dungeons, and his bloodied face hadn't given him away. As he was looking at his face wonderingly, something caught his attention.

There was a new scar on his forehead.

An old one, actually, which he didn't even had first-hand memories of, and which had been removed by surgery before. Why was it reappearing now? He slumped his head on the sink.

"What is going on?" he asked again.

It took him a long moment to gather his thoughts in a coherent set, before morphing his face into Harold Thomson's. For an unknown reason, the scar was resistant to this, and he concentrated for an even longer time to make it recede enough to be invisible.

Instead of joining his fellow students for the dinner, he went straight to the Owlery, and wrote a message to a bunch of people he trusted more than his current teachers.

That done, he joined the others in the Great Hall.

Once there, he got the surprise of finding a pale-faced and visibly tired Tracey, pushing her food around her plate. He tried to contact her mentally, but she wasn't answering. Not wanting to attract attention should her mind be in disarray, he refrained from going there. After all, he had told his friends that he wouldn't do it now, hadn't he?

When the girl left the room, closely followed by several of her Housemates, he stood up to follow, but Susan grabbed him, asking several pointed questions about today's lesson and demanding details about his absence. Despite his need to see Tracey, Susan was a nice girl, and the boggart's appearance when she had confronted it indicated that she cared about him, so he stayed a bit. He summed up his previous lie and assured her that he cared for her as well. When he finally disentangled from the tricky situation, Tracey had long since disappeared.

He concentrated on his connection to Cassie, but even through the castle mind's eye, he couldn't find where she was. He suddenly remembered about the three other girls who had left the Hall with her, and asked Cassie for their locations too.

Nothing either.

Damn.

Were they outside? Were they keyed to the castle like him? Were they even alive? A worry knot started to develop in his stomach, and he left the Hall, the concept of food suddenly not appealing anymore. After checking Tracey's usual hiding spots unsuccessfully, he found himself in the Library.

"Hermione?" he asked. "Can I borrow your owl? I just sent Quicksilver and I need to ask Alison another question."

She looked at him inquiringly, and suddenly asked "It's about Tracey?"

He looked down for a second, before raising his chin defiantly. "Yes. I don't know what's wrong with her, but something seems amiss."

She kept staring at him, and he was starting to feel uncomfortable and ready to lash out.

"Okay." she merely said, before returning to her book.

Harry didn't need to be told twice, and he rushed in the Owlery again. Once there, he wrote another message for the same person, and sent Athina with it. When the great owl took off, it hooted, and Harry could swear it meant something about students not knowing what they wanted.

The next morning, in the Headmaster's office...

"Headmaster! Headmaster!"

Albus Dumbledore looked up from his books, only to have the usual surprise of seeing Hagrid entering his office. How the small door did to let the overly large man pass, he had never guessed. That concern wasn't urgent, though. Unlike what the groundskeeper's worried face hinted at.

"What is it, Hagrid?"

"Teh chicks, Headmaster! Teh whole henhouse has been destroyed!"

"Stay calm, Hagrid. I'm sure we'll find a swift solution for our problem."

Internally, though, Dumbledore wasn't feeling so sure. He had the vague idea that this single event belonged to an affair of a much larger scale, but he couldn't place it.

Somewhere nearby, four days later, in the middle of the night...

"Fool girl! I told you to close your eyes!"

The sentences were uttered by a particularly large girl in a hesitant voice. After all, how inspired can one be when reading from a book? With her friends, she looked down in disgust at her frozen House mate, and they decided not to move her.

If the snake wanted a bite, or just fancied smashing her to pieces, it was all for the best.

The beast had left for now, though. It had only been a preliminary reunion, but the mudblood, seeming to have a less defined link with the magical book, had disobeyed its order and she had looked up. Apparently, judging by her position, she had been turned to stone by whatever was lurking in the foot-deep water... or by the reflection of the Master's pet.

The three friends wrote their reflections on the diary which, in the two weeks since they started sharing it, had become their most trusted

friend and mentor. When it answered, they opened wide eyes and smirked, before cackling uncontrollably.

That Tom Riddle was really a funny fellow!
The next Friday morning, the Great Hall...

In the previous week, Harry had slowly started to recover in his studies, despite the constant strain of searching for Tracey. The rare moments he had actually seen her, there had always been people blocking his way, or something unexpected happening, and he lost sight of her. At one time, he had witnessed her on the grounds, but hadn't been quick enough to get there in time to get to her. He hadn't even seen her in the last four days, and Ron, who shared most of his classes with the Slytherins, confirmed that she wasn't there either. The previous evening, Harry had even Apparated to her dorm, but she hadn't been there. He was starting to feel anxious about her.

His thoughts were jarred off course when a familiar screeching sound resounded in the Hall.

Mail time!

He looked up and noticed his faithful hawk circling in loose circles centred on him, causing apprehension in his fellow students, as well as outright fear in the few owls there. He didn't really think about it, and increased his skin toughness while raising his fist. As indicated in the leaflet sold with his messenger bird, the move was the signal for the falcon to land on the perch-shaped limp. There was a rather thick envelope rolled and tied to his bird's right leg, and Harry retrieved it before passing sausage and bacon to the tired bird. He then placed it on his shoulder.

He scanned the letter. It was from Alison.

Dear Harold,

Unless someone plays with fire, you should be the only one able to read this properly, the others will only see a message from your mum

asking for news. If you want, I'll teach you the charm next time we see each other.

Unfortunately, I checked in every book I could find on magical marks, and nothing came up relative to your scar. It's perhaps a stupid question, but have you tried going through your mind? Or apply a concealment charm?

For your other question, I did browse several books on magical illnesses and detection charms which I suppose Hogwarts is cluttered with, but apart from high-level Dark spells, I didn't find anything relating to Tracey's case. I had just a question about a spell I know. Do you think she could be hidden under the Fidelius spell? It allows the caster to hide buildings or parts of it from everyone save a particular one, called the Secret Keeper. He can, in turn...

Harry read the rest of the paragraph diagonally. Thanks to the Prophet – which would do better than print lies concerning established spells – he already knew what that spell implied.

After finishing the letter, his gaze unfocused as he considered Alison's answers, the letter still in his hand. Mere seconds afterwards, though, a sneering voice interrupted his musings, startling him.

“A nice bird you have here, Thomson.”

He whirled around, the move sending Quicksilver in the air. The Peregrine falcon screeched indignantly before leaving for the Owlery, and Harry forgot the sneering teacher clad in black in front of him. He was sure that his hawk's cries meant something in the like of "I'm not a mere bird, you overgrown bat!"

“This is the kind of twisted smile I could only expect from a Hufflepuff.” said Snape, referring to Harry's unconscious reaction to the meaning of his hawk's screeching.

Harry jolted awake, returning to the awareness of the moment.

“It’s quite normal, sir.” he answered. “Hufflepuffs are joyful people, so we smile. We aren’t bitter enough to sneer.”

A shocked silence ensued, and Harry’s Housemates began to retreat from the impending explosion from the surly Potion Master. The man was reddening rapidly, a sure sign of him working himself into a towering rage.

“I’m sorry, Professor.” Harry said suddenly, humbly hanging his head to the surprise of his fellow students around him. “Even if I haven’t meant it, I have been discourteous to you and I ask for forgiveness.” He waited for a few seconds, checking with his mind’s eye that the situation was defused somewhat. After all, Tracey was in Snape’s House, and he could need the man to check her. “It’s just that Tracey has been missing for five days now, and I’m quite jumpy right now.”

At that point, Snape’s anger was deflated enough for him to realize that the boy was talking about his Slytherin friend. However, the girl had been there during his last Friday class, and the black-clad teacher had the habit of not reading other teachers’ memos. He thus thought that the boy was just mocking him again, and straightened up, ready to take points and deliver detentions.

“What do you mean?” he demanded, pointing his hand toward the Slytherin table. “Miss Davis is... right... there?”

The sentence had started angrily but finished quietly, as Snape couldn’t point to Tracey. Was the boy right? Without saying a word, he continued his walk toward the staff table, and discussed animatedly – although quietly – with the other teachers. When they nodded gravely, one after the other, Snape straightened up and looked inquiringly at the Headmaster, who had listened to his questions. The old man discreetly grabbed his pendant for a second, before shaking his head at the distraught Potion Master. Snape then turned around and exited the Great Hall, his cloak billowing behind him.

“Quicksilver was right.” Harry muttered. “He sure looks like an overgrown bat.”

“Who’s Quicksilver?” asked a feminine voice beside him.

He jumped an inch and turned, finding Susan’s eyes looking back at him. “Err...” he started, not knowing what to say. After a few seconds of hesitations, she raised her eyebrows inquiringly, and he decided that the truth was as good a start as any. “It’s my falcon.”

“Riiiiight. Your falcon talks, now?”

“No, he screeches.” He smiled, and an idea formed in his head. “Besides, it was just an indirect way of saying that it was my cousin’s letter telling me that.”

She smirked. “Your cousin is right, anyway. He does look like a bat, especially when he walks like this.”

“I’m sure he practised this for years.”

They both laughed, before heading for the Library. Their Fridays’ class load was light, as they only had a period of Transfiguration, unlike the Gryffindor-Slytherin first year group which was now enjoying a double Potion period.

An hour afterwards, in the Potion Classroom...

Severus Snape wasn’t happy. He had put today’s potion recipe on the board and, after a few minutes wondering about Tracey Davis’ absence, decided to do something about it. After all, the girl was in his House, and he hadn’t taken care of her yet. If his responsibility was proven, he could very well lose his job. Despite Draco’s current bouts of unusual behaviour, he knew that the boy was the most knowledgeable of the Slytherins whereabouts, and he went to him.

“Where is Miss Davis?” he whispered. It wasn’t loud but enough so that Draco could hear him.

The boy looked at him, before shaking his head. “I don’t know.”

Snape looked at him pensively, before grabbing his arm. "Zabini, follow the recipe." he merely said, before dragging Draco to his office. The previously frozen overflowing cauldron which had been sitting there had long since been cleaned and the boy was shown to a seat.

"Sit down." said Snape before drawing his wand. "I'm sure that, even if you don't remember them actively, you have memories of her. Now, clear your mind." The boy trusted him, and he closed his eyes. When he nodded, indicating he was ready, Snape chanted one of his favourite incantations.

"Legilimens."

In the class proper, there were three girls looking at each other uneasily. Millicent Bulstrode, Daphne Greengrass, and Pansy Parkinson had heard the Professor's question and Draco's answer, and had a good idea of what was going on behind the closed office door. They nodded at each other and Pansy pulled a slim book from her schoolbag. She began writing on it furiously and then stopped, waiting for something.

The diary answered in his elegant script and flashed briefly. The girl had been thoughtful enough to hide it behind other parchments and books, but the other students weren't looking anyway, too taken in their potion. Seeing the lost gaze in her friend's face, Daphne took the book and wrote a short sentence before the diary flashed her as well. Just as Millicent was about to leave her seat from the row behind them, the office door opened and Snape released Draco before calling for Pansy. The girl obeyed, following her teacher in the office. Just as the door closed, Millicent went to Daphne and took the diary from the dazed girl's grip. That woke her just in time, as the cauldron she had been working on with Pansy had started to bubble uncontrollably. She tried to control the reaction, but the potion soon hissed furiously and several holes formed themselves in the cauldron holding it, leaking an acid liquid on the whole workbench.

Snape shot through the office door, ready to take points from Neville, when he found that it was Pansy and Daphne's cauldron which was

misbehaving. He merely froze the cauldron in place, holding the rest of the acidic solution in place. With a stern “clean it” to Daphne, he returned to his office.

While everyone was focused on Daphne, Millicent had been writing in the diary, and the accursed item flashed again, removing her memories of everything related to the Chamber of Secrets.

The following three weeks went slowly, the only event being a castle-wide search for Tracey made by the whole school body on the first week-end after her disappearance. Despite finding several lost items, the search was unsuccessful and Harry began to fear that his friend might have fled the castle, died, or both. He hadn't had another vision from Voldemort, but that didn't raise his spirits either. It was in such a gloomy state that he left the bustle of Hufflepuff main rooms, not caring about the upcoming Quidditch match between his House and Gryffindor. He wasn't joyful at all and decided to feed his snakes to pass some time in that otherwise drab Friday evening.

Given that he knew the kitchens location, Harry went there to fetch some raw meat, to the elves' astonishment, and returned to his dormitory. After checking that he was alone, he removed the shrunk cases from his trunk and went to his 4-poster bed. He climbed inside, closed its curtains, and enlarged the cases. Once again, he fed the king cobra first, then the three thin snakes...

Wait a second, there! He had always seen two snakes in that cage, so how comes they are three, now? Looking around the cage, he couldn't find any place under which they could hide, and decided that he mustn't have paid enough attention the other times he had seen them. Besides, he still had to feed the python. He put the thin snakes' cage away and put the python's on his knees, opening it. He turned to his side, taking the remaining meat in his hand, when...

“Ah. Food.”

The voice startled him and he looked around wildly. He even peered through his bed's drapes but nobody was there. Just to be sure, he also made a quick scan of his surroundings.

“There’s nobody here. I’m imagining things.” he muttered.

“No, human, you’re not.”

The voice had been near him and Harry jumped on his feet, startled again, and dumping the cage in the process.

“HEY! Watch out!”

The voice was coming... from the cage? It was a deep voice and, in a way, Harry was sure to have heard it before although he didn’t remember where. He could have searched his mind for the information, of course, but he was so shocked by what was happening to him that he wasn’t reacting to the best of his abilities.

He put the cage upright, and got an immediate confirmation.

“Ah. Better.”

Harry looked at the creature in the cage. He thought that the merchant had perhaps forgotten to tell him that it was a magical breed, able to talk.

“You talk?” he asked, looking at the long snake.

Said snake looked up and blinked. Its tongue darted out for a second and it hissed something.

“Of course I talk. All creatures do.”

“You aren’t a magical creature?” asked Harry, dumbfounded.

“Unless I’ve been lied to all my life, I’m not.” answered the snake.

Harry thought for a second. “And you understand me?”

The python moved around for a few seconds before answering. “I have been born in captivity, so I can understand the human language.

But that's not why I understand you. And definitely not why you can understand me."

"Why, then?"

"You are a Speaker, human. You can talk and understand us snakes."

"Why couldn't I speak with the other snakes, then?"

"Have you tried?"

"Err... no."

"Do it, then."

Harry was too shocked to consider doing anything else, and he opened the king cobra's trapdoor.

"Hello there." he said, rolling his eyes at the apparent stupidity of his actions.

Nothing happened.

"See? Nothing happened." he told the python.

"You didn't speak the snake language."

A second, then "What?"

"You seem to speak the language only when looking at us directly."

"Oh. Oh, well." He turned toward the cobra again and uttered "Hello there." while looking at the animal.

Said animal was eating his processed food at that moment, but it jumped suddenly and looked up. After a few seconds, it darted its tongue out. "Good evening, Master."

Harry was shocked. The python had been right! Something tugged at his mind, though.

“Why did you call me master? I’m just Harry. Do you have a name?”

“We have names, Master Harry,” started the python, “but they are a bit long. I don’t think that he-who-sleeps-on-sand is practical for humans. Besides, it seems to be your customs to give us names.”

“Right.” Harry nodded. “Are you agreeing? On me giving you names, I mean.”

“Yes.” answered the python, while the king cobra nodded.

Harry thought about it for a minute, remembering anything he could remember about cobras and pythons, before coming to a conclusion. “Well... I’ll propose a name and you tell me what you think about it. The first one,” he said, looking at the king cobra, “is Wadjet. I remember having read about it while in Egypt, it was the name of a deity whose symbol is the cobra.”

The cobra seemed to think about it for a second, before nodding. “Befitting.” it hissed, and Harry got the feeling that that particular snake wasn’t very talkative although quite a bit conceited.

“And for you,” he turned back to the python, letting Wadjet to its meal, “I suggest Shenlong. It is the name of a mythical Chinese dragon controlling wind and rain, and I also remembered that its representation was a very long reptile like you.”

Harry kept silent the facts that most Chinese dragon had the same representation, that the dragon’s face didn’t look like a python’s, or that said dragons had limbs. No need to insult the long snake. The python looked at him for a few seconds, before accepting its new name. Harry took then leave of his two large snakes and closed their cages’ trapdoors. He shrunk them again, and looked at his third cage questioningly, before deciding to have another chat.

He opened the trapdoor and looked at the three shiny snakes which seemed to sleep after having taken a mere bite at the meat. "Hi there."

One of them raised his tiny head and opened startling blue eyes. Upon seeing Harry looking down at him, it used its tail to shake his two counterparts and the three of them looked back at him. He felt their gaze and decided to give it another try. "Hello, shiny snakes. How are you today?"

"Hello Master." they answered in unison. "We are fine. Thank you for the food."

"I have a question. How many of you were in the cage when I bought you from the shop?"

"Two, Master."

Harry looked at them inquiringly. "How comes you're three, now?"

"That's because of our old master, Master."

"Firstly, I'd like to be called Harry. Secondly-" he started, but they interrupted him.

"Yes, Master Harry."

He sighed. That was going nowhere. "Secondly, what happened with your old master?"

"Our old master was an old man who wanted to make spies of us." started one of them, although Harry had to strain his ear to hear it. "He tried many potions but failed most of them, until his apprentice inadvertently dropped some powder in the master's cauldron while they were both looking elsewhere. When the master gave us the potion, it gave us pain while it transformed our bodies. The old master was ecstatic, but he wasn't able to reproduce the effects, and kept us in a very small cage until his death."

“Did he have a name?” asked Harry.

“We don’t know.” said another. “What we know is that the apprentice was jealous and hastened the old man’s demise. He also didn’t like snakes and sold the cage quickly afterwards.”

“What did the potion do?”

“We don’t know for sure, but we can camouflage quite easily, and make ourselves very hard. Judging by the state of the few animals our old master treated us with, our venom can be deadly. It also seems that when we don’t move for a long time, like when we stay in this cage, we will reproduce.”

“Reproduce? What do you mean?” Harry knew several things about reproduction. Hell, he had been in several normal human minds – and even some twisted ones –, and both held the reproduction process in high esteem. The way the snake had said it, though, suggested something different.

“From the old master’s original experience,” started the snake which had awakened first, “I was the last remaining specimen. Just before you came to fetch us, I found myself eating more and, after having doubled in size, I just cut myself in half, giving birth to he-who-is-second. That happened to him too, several days ago.”

Harry thought about it. If he wanted snakes to spy on people, he now had the perfect species. He shook himself out of his reverie, and addressed them again. “I gave names for the two other snakes; do you want me to do it for you too? That way, I can identify you by name.”

The three snakes looked at each other, before speaking at the same time. “Yes, Master Harry.”

Harry thought about it.

Three snakes... He’d better find three names from the same origin.

Origins... History... reminiscences...

He drifted in his memories, remembering the time he spent in Geneva. After reading some comics there, he had searched a bit around the pictured hero named Thor and it had led to the Norse mythology.

Three snakes, spying on people, and eventually deciding on someone's death through their venom.

Three names... the three weavers of fate.

The Fates. The witches.

The Norns.

He looked up. "That's it." he said. "I propose that the first of you be called Urd, the second Verdandi, and the third Skuld. In an old language and mythology, it respectively means "those who were" or the past, "those who are" or the present, and "those who will" or the future. Do you agree?"

The three snakes looked at each other again, and then at Harry. "We accept. They are perfect. Thank you, Master Harry."

Harry thanked them back, before parting from them. He shrunk their cage too and exited the bed. Nobody was there yet, and he stored the three cages in his trunk again, before returning to bed.

He laid in the fluffy bed, looking at his bed's yellow-and-black striped drapes, wondering about things for several hours while his fellow students slowly trickled in from the noisy common room.

Where was Tracey? That was his first and foremost thought, and he asked Cassie, once again, to check about her location. And, once again, he didn't get the positive answer he waited for.

What will be the outcome of tomorrow's game? The short-lived thought was imposed by the surrounding chatter, but he didn't even

think about it and concentrated not to listen to his House mates' nattering.

A couple of hours later, another thought struck him. What in the hell will he do with spying snakes? He didn't need them, as Cassie provided the best spying tool he could ever dream of. He could use them to kill also, it seemed, but who would he kill?

Who would he want to kill with a snake?

...kill with a snake?

He yelped, eliciting annoyed groans from his now sleepy dorm mates. Calming himself, he processed his thoughts again. "Killed with a snake" was something which could be attributed to Moaning Myrtle, no? Every bits of research he had discussed with his friends in general and Hermione specifically came back to his mind. The king of snakes...

He jumped off his bed. The adrenaline was pumping in his veins, now, making sleep impossible. As he was clothing himself, he castigated himself because of his perceived lack of forethought. It has been a long time, almost a month, since he had awakened and talked with Hermione about this, and he hadn't reacted until now! After putting his boots on, he cast a silencing charm on them and exited the dormitory and Hufflepuff's cellar, heading toward a particular bathroom on the second floor. As his habit was still to walk around the castle, he hadn't thought of Apparating there, although he was lucky that Filch was in another area of the school altogether.

Once in the bathroom, he looked around and softly called. "Myrtle?"

The toilet in the second stall flushed, followed by the first, and Myrtle passed through the wall leading to the sinks.

Seeing his face, she smiled. "It's you! I have been so long without having a proper conversation! The girls who pass by don't even look at me!"

"Thank you, Myrtle. See, I want to ask you something-"

“You didn’t come here to have a chat with me?” she asked, tears threatening to fall again.

Harry swore. Internally, of course. He needed her.

He would oblige.

After all, a little chit-chat didn’t hurt, did it?

An hour afterwards, he would change his mind. His ears ringing from Myrtle’s wails about the world’s injustice, he finally succeeded in asking about her death.

“What do you mean?” she replied suspiciously.

“I’m sorry, Myrtle. It’s the discussion, I got carried away. I just wanted to know the circumstances of your death.”

“But... I died here, of course! Why do you think I’m haunting these toilets?” she was starting another rant, and Harry tried to change its course before it went too far – he had already discussed with her several times, but he wanted specific information, now.

“How? How did you die?”

“I was... well, I had finished my affairs...” If a ghost could blush, Myrtle would have got a special distinction. “And I heard a noise.” she said quickly as if to cover her previous activity. “Several noises in fact. I thought it was the dark thing.” Registering Harry’s enquiring face, she snorted. “I don’t know how you call it! I was muggleborn, you know?”

“Hey, I am too.” said Harry, trying to soothe her. When it was done, he asked. “And after?”

“I discreetly peered through the slightly open door and I saw and heard the creature exiting her hole and coiling its body in front of a

student. The snake must have sensed me, because it turned its head toward me, and..."

"And?"

"And that's my last memory of being alive. When I awoke, several years had passed and I discovered I had died. It wasn't a playful experience."

"Even if I can't really understand it, Myrtle, I offer my sympathy for your trials."

They stayed calm for a bit and Myrtle broke the silence.

"You are kinder than the girls who pass here." she said.

Harry thought about it, and came to a startling conclusion. "You spoke twice about girls passing by..."

"Yes?"

"Can you tell me who they were and where they went?"

Myrtle thought about it, before looking at him shrewdly. "I haven't told you about where they went."

"Yes, Myrtle, that's why I ask you about it."

"That's strange, because they were several, and always came through the door and headed for the hole."

"The hole?"

"Yes, from which the snake came."

Harry suddenly felt as if his stomach had been filled with lead.

"Where is that hole, Myrtle?"

“Ha ha ha.” she said in a sing-song voice. “I won’t tell you.”

“Please, Myrtle.”

She turned serious. “Alright. I’ll tell you, but you have to do one thing first.”

“Okay. What is it?”

“Kiss me.”

“WHAT?” he shouted, before looking around in fright. “I can’t do that.” he argued in a much lower tone, positively disgusted.

“I’m not asking for a love kiss, you boy!” she explained, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “A friendship kiss on the cheek is all I ask.”

He reluctantly approached her, and slowly approached the floating girl. He closed his eyes, closing in...

The feeling was strange, as if he was really feeling something under his lips. But it was cold. So cold... So full of distress too, and yet with so much hope...

He made the appropriate sound and the ghost retreated suddenly. Harry opened his eyes and they looked at each other for a few moments. Myrtle was the first to move, and she raised her finger, indicating the nearby pillar. Said pillar was holding several sinks and held multiple patterns in the form of snakes.

Harry looked at the thing and absently asked something.

“What do I do?”

Myrtle gasped and Harry looked at her inquiringly.

“What?”

“You did it! You did it too!” she was quickly returning to her usual frantic self.

“What did I do?” he asked. “I only asked what I had to do to open the hole.”

“When they come to open it, they do exactly like you. They hiss something and the hole opens. I don’t like the hisses; it reminds me of the snake.” She said, falling into tears, before departing in the nearest toilet stall.

Harry looked at the sinks in wonder. Hisses? Snakes?

Of course! The sinks must be a door like the common rooms, linked to a password of some sort. Except that the password had to be hissed. Appropriate for the snake’s den, he thought.

He looked at the decorative snakes again, trying to guess the password, and a scene from his early childhood came unbidden. Petunia reading Ali Baba and the 40 thieves to put the twins to sleep. He smiled.

“Open, Sesame!” he hissed.

And, to his surprise, the sinks moved. They separated, and a dark hole opened in the middle.

He thought about it for a moment, and decided that he could always Apparate if he found himself in a tight situation.

He jumped.

After a long descent, punctuated by several tunnels branching off the one he was gliding in, he finally fell on a pile of rodent bones. During the forced descent, he had felt something pressing against his mind, as if forcing him to consider leaving the place, but by the time he took to react, the feeling had passed – he reflected that it might have been a warding charm of some sort.

Beside the numerous carcasses, he also found several tube-shaped coats of a leather-like substance, although it was quite damp and rotten. He suddenly understood that the huge slabs of these came from the basilisk, and estimated its size to 50 feet.

“Merlin! It’s huge!” he said aloud.

His imagination suddenly provided him with much more dangerous situation, and he had to actively concentrate not to shiver like a leaf. He tried to call for Cassie to help him, but the castle’s consciousness was strangely absent, as if the connection wasn’t usable in the room. He shook himself and advanced further.

After opening the door using the same word in the same language, and passing through a corridor full of snake statues, he finally found himself in a large room with a foot of water. The most impressive sight in the whole room was the head sculpted in the wall in front of him. It took the whole length and height of the room, and the statue’s stylized hair was a tangle of slopes on which he was sure he could climb or even set up a small tent – it was that big.

Shaking his surprise off, he turned around, and found his second surprise. It was a mitigated one, as the joy he felt at finding Tracey was mixed with the anguish of finding her in that state.

It didn’t believe it at first, but the Basilisk’s powers came to his mind, and he understood.

She was turned into a stone statue.

After a minute of contemplating his possible options, he decided that they were few and grasped Tracey’s statue. Shuddering under her weight, he Apparated out and zipped out of the chamber. In the gaseous reality, weight didn’t really count, and he held Tracey’s statue by the hand. He went back to Myrtle’s bathroom, idly noting that the entrance hole had been closed, and exited it, heading toward the Hospital Wing.

Returning to tangibility, he carefully deposited Tracey into a bed and considered his next course of actions. He could stay, of course, but whatever shape he would take, it would be suspicious. Despite his reluctance to do so, he decided to flee to the gaseous reality, knocking thrice at Madam Pomfrey's office door beforehand.

He still stayed in the room, wanting to know what would happen. The Hospital Matron unlocked her door and opened to see nobody around. She grumbled and proceeded to turn back when her gaze caught sight of someone in a bed. Hurrying to the person's side, she gasped, and went to her fireplace. A few minutes afterwards, Albus Dumbledore and the four Heads of House appeared.

The six adults grouped around the student's bed and stayed silent for a long time. Minerva McGonagall was the first to break the silence.

"Albus." she started in a frightened voice, something so out of character on her that the other looked at her in wonder. "Do you think... Has it started again?"

Dumbledore looked at her, then at Tracey still form. His shoulder slumped, and he didn't answer for a long time. Just as his Deputy Headmistress was going to ask her question again, he answered it. "I don't know." he said, but the others felt that the old man knew more than he said.

"Albus, Minerva, none of us have been here for as long as you." stated Snape. "What are you talking about?"

Dumbledore looked at him. "We'd best move to my office. We can't do anything for poor Tracey right now. Poppy?" he asked, registering the nurse's state of unrest.

"Headmaster?" the school nurse asked, unsure of how to present the fact. "When I told you about her being there in the Floo, I forgot something. I have been awakened by a loud knock on my office door, but when I opened it, nobody was there. Except Miss Davis, of course.

Besides, the infirmary doors were still magically locked, as you found out. Why?"

The aged Headmaster looked around. "I don't know, Poppy, but I promise we'll work on it."

"Has she been cursed? It's not something I'm used to treat."

"Don't worry, we'll find a solution," he replied. "Just make sure that nobody stays alone with her."

She nodded, and the five others left the room. Dumbledore was so preoccupied that he completely missed the feeling of being observed. After all, he was in Hogwarts, and the castle observed everyone.

Once settled comfortably, Snape asked his question again, and Dumbledore sighed, pinching the bridge of his large nose. The other occupants of the room suddenly became aware of their Headmaster's advanced age. Incidentally, they noticed that they hadn't been offered the customary basket of lemon-flavoured sweets. Dumbledore adjusted his glasses before answering.

"Fifty years ago, there has been a murder in this school," he started. "And before that, strange events occurred, in the like of what we saw today. Several students were turned to stone."

He sighed heavily, noticing McGonagall's shock.

"There is a way to cure that state, of course. All we need is a few mandrake roots and chicken feathers to be minced into a regular skin hardening lotion," he said, looking at Sprout and Snape.

"It's a good thing we started a new batch of mandrakes with the second years," stated Sprout. "They should be ready in a week. You want only one?"

"I'm afraid we will need more than that," answered Dumbledore grimly. "Make sure to send all your production to Severus."

After several seconds, a thoughtful Snape looked at him. "Do you know that by heart, Albus? I mean... you aren't a Healer, and..."

"Let me tell you the story of what happened fifty years ago." Albus told them tiredly. "After the death of young Myrtle, a student named Tom Riddle exposed another student and got the Award for Services to the School." He sighed. "The exposed student was a third year named Rubeus Hagrid. He was expelled and his wand was broken."

"I remember that." said Minerva. "I was there at the time. How one could have had suspicions over the poor boy, I'll never know."

"During and after these events, I made in-depth research in all this, and came to several startling conclusions." Dumbledore continued. "It seems that our Potion professor of that time gathered a group of students with potential and pushed them on a path where they could become very influential afterwards."

McGonagall snorted, but Dumbledore continued his story.

"It wasn't well-known at that time, and I learnt about it only later, but Tom Riddle got himself a surname. He called himself... Lord Voldemort."

There were four audible gasps in the suddenly silent room.

"I suspect Tom to have done something. Something terrible. Something which is repeating itself today." Dumbledore said after some time.

"What happened to Hagrid?" asked Sprout.

"Despite having admitted, under a truth serum, to have brought a dangerous creature into the school, Hagrid was innocent of the murder. The Board of Governors couldn't do anything else than expel Hagrid, break his wand, and press charges. As I was sure of the boy's innocence, I tried to overturn the verdict but the Board was final. Even if I couldn't prevent the two first punishments to happen, I

circumvented the third by asking Headmaster Dippet to hire the boy as groundskeeper.”

“What about the Chamber of Secrets?” asked McGonagall. “Did you find something?”

“Alas, no, Minerva.” Dumbledore answered, before turning to the others to explain. “During the whole period, there were messages written in blood on the school’s walls. They told about the imminent advent of the Heir of Slytherin, and it spoke about the Chamber of Secrets, one of Hogwarts’ less-known myths.”

“Was it a myth, Albus?” asked Snape.

“To this day, I still don’t know, Severus.” the Headmaster replied, before explaining a bit more. “The Chamber has been rumoured to hold Salazar Slytherin’s secrets but he hadn’t been able to access it after being driven out of the school by Godric Gryffindor. For several hundreds of years, students and staff searched for the room but no one succeeded. However, even if the Chamber’s reality is only a rumour, the "Chamber incident" happened.”

He sighed, again. “And I have the feeling that it might happen again.”

They all fell silent before falling in a more mundane conversation.

Unbeknownst to them, there had been a sixth person in the room. Harry had stayed in the gaseous reality and had concentrated enough to hear the whole conversation perfectly, and he had strengthened his own opinion on the way. The teacher’s new topics of conversation weren’t of any interest to him, though, and he took it as his cue to leave. Besides, the adrenaline rush had completely subsided by now, and he was quite tired.

Had he stayed, though, he would have learnt about the Headmaster’s current state in seeking Harry Potter.

The next day dragged everyone around the Quidditch pitch for the Hufflepuff-Gryffindor game. Unlike the other Houses, and particularly Slytherin, any Quidditch match with the Hufflepuffs could be called a

friendly game instead of a tough confrontation. After all, their loyal streak pushed them to respect the rules and their caring nature forbidden any foul play, even if some was tolerated in the rules. As such, they rarely won the cup, but their light-hearted personality trait allowed them not to care about it too much.

They still played hard, though, and the match was well-balanced at 140-110 in the favour of Gryffindor when Ron spotted the Snitch and started the customary Seeker race for the elusive ball. As the redhead had made several false attempts before, the Hufflepuff Seeker only hesitantly followed at first, but it cost him the victory at the end, and Gryffindor found themselves going up in the House Cup race, with 290 more points.

That afternoon, Harry and his friends from the study group congratulated Ron for his well-deserved victory, before starting the week-end homework. As Hermione often said: "working Saturday frees Sunday for other activities." and they all agreed on the principle. She seldom pursued that line of thoughts nowadays, though, as her usual free-time activity consisted of more studies. By helping each other, they finished several minutes before dinner, and Hermione decided to start a short brainstorming session to give the group a name.

"A name?" asked Terry Boot, one of her fellow Ravenclaws.

"Yes, a name." she answered. "It would be better than "that study group of ours," especially as older students have their own ones."

"I propose T.S.G.O." said Justin, his smile indicating that he wasn't quite serious.

"Why?" asked Harry.

"Because it's the initials of "That Study Group of Ours"."

They laughed about it, before concentrating on a name, throwing ideas like paper planes.

“The Students?”

“The Hard-Working Students?”

“Come on, we aren’t that hard-working.” that was Hermione.

“The Successful Students?”

“The Young Students?”

“The Young... and The Restless?”

“WHAT?”

There was a stunned pause, and most of the students raised in the muggle world collapsed in an uncontrollable fit of laughter, while the others looked at the scene with wide eyes.

“Sorry, muggle soap.”

“It’s a soap brand?”

Another fit of laughter followed, but Hermione ended it by proposing another name, getting the brainstorming session back into its track.
“Society of Scholars?”

“Scholars United?”

“Scholars of Individuals Chasing Knowledge?”

A pause.

“It’s sick.”

“I know it’s S.I.C.K.! That’s why I made it.”

Another round of laughter.

“The Badgers?”

“Too Hufflepuffish. I propose... The Lions?”

“Too Gryffindorish.”

“The Keepers? No, don’t tell me. Too Quidditch-oriented.”

“Hogwarts Studying Association?”

“I don’t think we should include an H in our acronym. That would give a dead hint on our leader.”

They laughed, while Hermione blushed at the hidden praise.

“Association for Knowledge Pursuit?”

“Association of Studious Students?”

“Hey! That gives A.S.S.! No way! Hmmm... I propose The Order of Scholars.”

“Order of the Unicorn?”

“Order of the Mole?”

“Why the Mole?”

“Well... I don’t know. Don’t we bury ourselves in our studies?”

“It would be worse if we studied alone, I think.”

“Hear, hear.”

“I propose the Order of the Phoenix.”

A pause.

“It’s nice and all, but we are straying from the topic, here.” Hermione said. “Even if the Phoenix Order is interesting, if we can make it so that the group’s name reflects its studious nature, it would be better, wouldn’t it?”

“I don’t know, Hermione. Our studious group did fight with snowballs once, didn’t we?”

“ Alright, alright. What would you think of the Order of Saint Jerome?”

“Why?”

“He is the patron saint of librarians.”

“Well... we aren’t librarians, you know.”

“You’re right. What do you propose, then?”

“We are students. What’s the patron saint of students?”

“Do you really think that we should name our group after a muggle saint?”

“Why not? Don’t you have saints in the wizarding world?”

“I don’t think the discussion about saints should be held today.” Hermione said, effectively placating the issue. She stored her Quick-Notes Quill and parchment away and stood. “Thank you for your many ideas. We will continue at the next meeting, if you wish.”

The group slowly trickled out of the Room of Requirements, the students going back to their dorms to store their schoolbags away before dinner. Harry didn’t follow his fellow Hufflepuffs, though, stopping on first floor while they continued downstairs.

Thanks to the Headmaster's announcement at breakfast, everyone knew that Tracey had reappeared, and Ron, Hermione and Harry had visited her once already. Harry decided to pay the statue-like girl another visit and went to the infirmary. Just as he opened the door, though, he noticed Tracey's three dorm mates around her bed. Pansy and Daphne, the two girls facing him, quickly schooled their expression, but Harry was quite sure that they weren't showing affection toward the prostrate girl.

As they were leaving the infirmary, Harry quickly ran his eyes over his friend, before deciding that he'd better follow the three Slytherin girls as he couldn't do anything for Tracey. Unlike coma, her state didn't allow her to hear her surroundings. In fact, several muggles could find her state inspiring, especially those scientists researching suspended animation technologies.

After checking that nobody was around, he left the tangible reality once again, and proceeded to follow the three girls. He noticed them entering the same out-of-order bathroom he exited a few hours ago, and followed them. He witnessed Pansy getting a book out of her schoolbag and hissing the word "open" in the snake language. He also followed them when they jumped in the tunnel, although he was going at a more sedate pace, not falling like the previous time.

Now that he was going slower, he remarked that there were many tunnels branching off from the one he was descending, and he got the impression of having entered a maze. After floating down for fifteen minutes, he became aware of two things: the fall he had experienced during his last visit had been quite fast and, currently, he was still moving around; and the tunnel he was walking in was dirty, much more than the main one.

He didn't remember having turned at one point, but his last visit to the Chamber of Secrets came unbidden to his mind, and he recalled having his mind pushed away at some point. He reflected that, due to his intangible nature and lack of weight, he hadn't been dragged through whatever spell protected the Chamber, this time.

He swore, and decided not to tempt fate by going to the Chamber again. Instead, there was a source of information about the whole

event which he had almost overlooked. Apparating to the Entrance Hall, he located his target outside. Just as he took a step toward it, though, Hermione and Ron found him.

“Harry!” called Hermione.

“Hey, mate.” said Ron.

“Where are you going?” Hermione enquired. “Dinner is starting soon.”

Harry thought about it before answering. “I’m going to see Hagrid. He might have interesting things to say concerning... something.”

His two friends looked at him pensively before nodding. It wasn’t often that Harry hid something from them so blatantly, but they knew the boy had more secrets than the ones they knew already.

“Thank you guys.” Harry said, visibly relieved that they hadn’t pressed the issue. “Eat well and get me a sandwich or two. I’ll tell you later.”

The separated, and Harry went to the groundskeeper’s hut, where he knew Hagrid was taking his meals. Apart from feasts, the large man seldom partook in meals in the Great Hall.

He knocked.

“What yeh want again, Filch?” came the gruff reply, and the half-giant threw the door open. If Harry hadn’t had a proper balance, he would have been toppled over by the sheer air turbulence.

“Oh. It’s yeh.” Hagrid said, lowering his gaze. “I remember yeh...”

“Yes, sir. I was with my friends, playing with snowballs.” said Harry, pleased that the man remembered him.

“And ye friend almost caught a nasty cold.” finished Hagrid. “It’s Hagrid, though, plain Hagrid. Don’t call me ‘sir’, it makes me think o’

me dad.” he returned to his cauldron, using a large ladle to stir something in his large cauldron, muttering at the same time. “Me dad. A good man, he was. Pity he died so soon, but at least he didn’t see me expelled-”

Harry coughed discreetly and Hagrid stopped his rambling soliloquy, acknowledging his visitor again. Visibly, the giant man seemed to talk to himself quite often. He stopped stirring and turned around.

“Why don’t ye tell me what brings ye here while I make some tea?”

Harry nodded, and Hagrid turned around to prepare the tea.

“During the last few days, I overheard several people speaking about something strange.” Harry started, speaking slowly. “When my friend Tracey was missing, I knew that something was wrong.”

Hagrid had finished pouring the hot amber liquid and was sitting on his own oversized armchair, holding his own cup.

Harry looked at him, and felt the aura of kindness surrounding the man. How could he ask him that? Strengthening his resolve, he straightened up and started.

“I want to know what happened 50 years ago. I want to know what you know about the Chamber of Secrets. And, more importantly, I want to know why an innocent boy found himself expelled.”

Hagrid was frozen in the middle of his action. His mug had broken under his powerful fingers when Harry had started talking about the Chamber, but the spilt liquid and clay bits didn’t register in his shocked mind.

At the same time, in the Great Hall...

The eating staff and students had finished the main course and were attacking the dessert when the Great Hall doors banged open and admitted a portly man with a green bowler hat. The man was followed by four Aurors in full uniform, and went straight to the head table.

“Who is it?” asked Hermione to Ernie, who shrugged before transmitting the question to his neighbour. By the time the man reached the table, Dumbledore had stood up, and the students were whispering furiously.

“It is always an honour to receive you, Cornelius.” he said, trying to be civil and to silence the hall at the same time. “After all, it’s not everyday that the Minister of Magic himself strides in our halls. Mind sharing a part of that delicious pudding?”

Fudge wasn’t fooled by the twinkle in the aged Headmaster’s eyes, and drew a scroll from his pocket, silently passing it to Dumbledore who opened and read it. When he finished, he sat down heavily, his twinkle reduced to a mere glimmer.

“Cornelius, you know Hagrid doesn’t have anything-”

Fudge interrupted him. “The Ministry has been informed of the new developments here, and the Board of Governors has met to discuss that very topic.”

Dumbledore frowned. “To call for such a meeting, someone must have the necessary power, Cornelius. Who did it?”

“I’m afraid it’s me.” A haughty voice said from the Great Hall entrance, and several necks cranked as almost all heads swivelled to see a man with long blond hair and a silver cane entering the room.

“Ah. Lucius.” was all Dumbledore said. Both men knew the chess game taking place, and both understood the move that had just been taken.

“Are you going to say something about this, Headmaster?” asked Fudge.

The addressed old man looked around for a second before nodding. “As the bill has been countersigned by the whole Board, I can’t do anything.” He sighed, before standing up. “You know where to find him. Do what you have to do.”

Fudge, Malfoy, and Dumbledore left the Great Hall followed by the four Aurors, and under the surprised and curious gazes of the whole school. Lucius Malfoy was frowning, though. Not only Severus had visibly avoided his gaze, but he hadn't seen his son at the Slytherin table.

Hermione had been sitting at her usual spot, close to the head table, and she had heard the whole discussion. At the mention of Hagrid, she had understood that Harry could have problems and decided to warn him. She had concentrated on using her feeble Legilimency powers to warn Harry, but it didn't seem to work.

She felt something helping her, though.

Hagrid was taken in a digression about his childhood when both of them heard an insistent knock at the door. The visitor didn't wait to be introduced and the door opened, leaving way for a Malfoy.

Draco Malfoy.

Harry and Hagrid looked at the boy in surprise, but said boy looked at Harry intently and winked, once. Harry then understood that Draco's body must be under Cassie's control.

"The Minister is here." the blond started. "He want Hagrid's hide."

The man gasped, and Harry looked at him thoughtfully.

Draco wasn't finished, though. "He also has four men with him, and Lucius Malfoy follows."

At the mention of his father, the boy's face suddenly scrunched. Sweat beads began forming on his forehead and Harry understood that the two consciousnesses were battling for dominance. Harry grabbed Draco's hand and looked at Hagrid intently. "I'll be right back. Stow the tea set away and turn your fires off. And grab your dog and whatever you need to survive in the Forbidden Forest."

“But... I can’t leave!” stuttered the large man, looking at his cauldron imploringly.

“Do it!” hissed Harry, before both boys disappeared with a loud popping sound.

Harry knew that Draco’s consciousness would find it strange to have woken up in Hagrid’s hut, and he Apparated him directly in front of Slytherin common room entrance before going back to Hagrid. Once there, he found the man looking lost, holding something round in mittens. The tea set had been stowed away, but the man was clearly not ready to leave.

“I... Norbert... I can’t leave him...”

“What is it? And what does it need?” asked Harry.

“He isn’t ready to hatch yet. He needs fire.”

Harry didn’t even answer and took two cauldrons, one just able to hold the egg and the other large enough to enclose the other one. He levitated the burning wood and embers from the fireplace in the large cauldron and put the smaller one on top of it. His wand working overtime, he levitated the egg from Hagrid’s feeble grasp into the small cauldron before reducing the whole thing. He then grasped one of the man’s mittens and stowed the still hot cauldron in it.

The whole operation had taken thirty seconds and Harry knew they had to move quickly. He pocketed the mitten and looked around.

“What do you need for a trip in the Forest? Quick!”

“Err... me crossbow. And me umbrella.” the man said, blushing and pointing at the items. The crossbow was near the door and the umbrella rested near the man.

“Grab the umbrella and go near your dog.” hissed Harry. He was starting to hear voices arguing from outside.

While Hagrid recovered his pink umbrella, Harry ran nimbly to the weapon and picked it up. Just as he was returning to the pair, they heard a knock at the door.

“Aurors. Open the door, Mr Hagrid.” a strong voice came from outside.

Harry put a finger on his mouth and gave the crossbow to a startled Hagrid. The boy then grabbed the half-giant’s hand and the dog’s neck, and Apparated out as silently as he could.

Outside, the Aurors were getting impatient. On Fudge’s nod, they turned the door’s handle and opened the door cautiously, wands at the ready. They were disappointed to find the place empty.

Dumbledore’s twinkle returned full force. “It seems that Hagrid has taken upon himself to do a bit of exploring in the forest.”

“Preposterous nonsense!” exclaimed Fudge. “His departure is a clear indication of his guilt. I bet we’ll never see him again.”

“Now, now, Cornelius-”

“The forest?” interrupted Malfoy, eyeing the nearby trees suspiciously. “Isn’t it forbidden?”

“You seem to remember your school days perfectly, Lucius.” answered Dumbledore. “Yes, it is forbidden... for students. As groundskeeper, Hagrid has to meet regularly with the creatures living in it. You know which ones, Cornelius. Besides,” he started, looking inside the hut to confirm his hunch, “his fire is doused, and his crossbow isn’t there. He always takes it with him in the Forest.”

Malfoy grunted. Obviously, his master’s plan to get the half-breed out of the picture had failed... temporarily. He then smiled to Fudge. “I’m sure the Ministry can spare an Auror or two on permanent guard duty to catch a known murderer.”

Fudge looked at him, startled, before frowning thoughtfully. After several seconds of intense reflection, he snapped his fingers. "I got a wonderful idea, Dumbledore! As the... man..."

"Hagrid." provided Dumbledore, knowing full well what Fudge was doing.

"Yes. Him. As he's a convicted murderer, we will post two of these" he waved at the four Aurors there "to guard this hut."

"Convicted murderer, Cornelius?" asked Dumbledore. "You know as I do that the man hasn't been convicted of murder."

Fudge waved the opposition away, though. "Semantics, semantics, Dumbledore. You'll see him admit his crimes soon enough. Now, if you don't mind, I have guard duty to assign."

It took most of 150 years of experience for Dumbledore to contain himself. At that very moment, the placid and benign Headmaster had a primal urge of wriggling the pompous Minister's neck. He couldn't, though, and felt like the numerous people steamrolled by an insensitive administration.

That day also marked the beginning of a severe antipathy between the two men.

During the whole scene, none of them felt the three living beings atop them, one of whom was intently listening to them. While the second entity looked around in wonder, the third was resuming its interrupted nap.

Several minutes later, the same three reappeared in the middle of a clearing far into the Forbidden Forest.

"I'm sorry." Harry said. Not giving Hagrid time to recover, he went to the man's mind and changed his immediate memory. That was quite easy for him, as Hagrid didn't have any mind defence. The half-giant would now think he had been warned by some unnamed student and had escaped the investigation team long before they arrived. Harry

took advantage of being in the half-giant's mind to learn everything he could about the Chamber incident of 50 years ago.

After checking that the man was proficient enough to live in the Forest by himself, he returned to his own body and Apparated out. Hagrid was too stunned by whatever had happened in his mind to have noticed his presence and subsequent disappearance.

Harry hurried through the gaseous trees and quickly found himself back at Hogwarts. The Minister was taking leave of Dumbledore, followed by Malfoy and the two remaining Aurors. He went to the Entrance Hall, where a few dozen students were looking at the departing group curiously. Passing them, he found an empty corridor devoid of portraits and Apparated in, before rushing to the group.

“Where were you?” a known voice whispered to his ear.

He turned and found an upset Hermione. Before he could say anything, though, Dumbledore had returned. He mouthed “later.”

“I guess you want to know what’s going on?” the Headmaster asked to the crowded hall.

When most of the students there nodded, alongside a few teachers, he sighed.

“Our groundskeeper is wanted by the Ministry. They wish to interrogate him concerning Miss Davis’ return.”

“Headmaster?” asked Julia Weston, a bookish-looking seventh year Ravenclaw with glasses, and incidentally Head Girl for the year. “Why didn’t they take Hagrid with them, then?”

“Hagrid has left earlier today for one of his usual errands.” replied Dumbledore. “As groundskeeper, it’s his job to ensure that no dangerous creature will get out of the Forbidden Forest to eat us.”

He smiled benignly then, and moved his arms in a well-known gesture. “Shoo, now. You shouldn’t stay there.”

The students left, most of them whispering to each other animatedly. From the corner of his eyes, the Headmaster caught one of them shaking his head in a peculiar manner. When he looked that way, though, he noticed nothing out of the ordinary. Just three students walking back to their common room.

Except that those three didn't share a common room since they weren't in the same House. The Weasley and Thomson boys and Hermione Granger. Why did he have a feeling that the move he had just perceived was that of somebody knowing he wasn't speaking the whole truth?

In the Room of Requirements, several minutes later, the three students were discussing the recent events and the older ones. More accurately, one of them was telling and the two other listened and commented.

"You remember the... Chamber incident?" Harry asked.

"The what?" asked Ron, clearly thrown off the loop.

"Why?" enquired Hermione, who had a better memory and analytical spirit than her Gryffindor friend.

"Because... it's happening again." he whispered.

Seeing their lost looks, he explained what he got from Hagrid's retelling and memory, without saying that he fetched the information from the man's mind. He then told them that they got a surprise visit from another student, whom he didn't name, and they both had sufficient time to flee the Ministry. Hermione's shrewd look made him believe that she heard most of what left unsaid, though.

"Basically," she started, "there have been students turned to stone 50 years ago and then a murder. Hagrid has been convicted for these but he only admitted having raised a huge spider which now resides in the Forbidden Forest. Honestly, Ron, stop shaking in fear every time we say the word spider!"

“Sorry, guys. It’s just that I’m seeing so many spiders these days. I’m sure they sense me or something... Sorry, Hermione.”

She sat up and continued. “Now, we have a Minister who seeks Hagrid and a student turned to stone again. Am I correct this far?”

“Yes.” said Harry, while Ron nodded along.

“But a huge spider doesn’t turn people to stone!” she exclaimed. “There are perhaps dark spells to do it, or even potions. Only a few species of creatures can turn people to stone. Gorgons, Medusas, and...”

“Wait a second!” interrupted Ron. “What was the animal the ghost in the toilets spoke about?”

“A snake.” whispered Harry, so low that the two others had to bend closer to hear it. “The king of snakes.” He looked at Hermione. “A Basilisk.”

She looked back. “A Basilisk turns people to stone. Many creatures are frightened by it, especially those who have several or lidless eyes.” She turned toward Ron. “Like spiders.”

“How can we kill it?” asked Harry.

Ron looked at him as if he had lost it. “We can’t kill that kind of beast, Harry!”

Hermione was looking thoughtful, though. “Basilisks fears roosters. A rooster’s cry can kill a basilisk. Oh my god!” she gasped. “That’s why!”

The other two looked at each other. “Why what?” asked Harry.

“There hasn’t been any egg or egg-based recipes on our tables today and I talked to Julia about it.”

“Julia?” asked Ron.

“Julia Weston, our Head Girl. Anyways... She happened to know that the hen house had been destroyed. Somebody is helping the creature along!”

They stayed silent for a moment.

“I know who it is.” said Harry. “I saw them around Tracey, and in the bathroom as well.”

“The bathroom?”

“Yes. I discussed with Myrtle and found the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets.”

“You WHAT?” Hermione practically shrieked. “Why didn’t you inform a teacher?”

“I’m sorry, alright?” Harry answered, rather peeved about her reaction. He passed a hand in his hair. “My days have been pretty hectic, currently.”

After a few seconds of silence, Ron asked him to continue his tale and he complied, telling them that he found Tracey in a subterranean chamber.

“I can only guess that it’s the fabled Chamber,” he continued, “but it was rather empty, and there weren’t many protections around it. I only had to hiss “open” and it opened.”

The two others looked at him as if he had grown another head, and Ron looked frightened as well.

“Err... “hiss,” Harry?” asked Hermione. “How can you hiss a word?”

“Why, Hermione. Like this.” and he said “open” in the snake language.

Hermione looked intrigued, but Ron's reaction was more violent. He stood up and recoiled, positively frightened.

"You... you... you're a Parselmouth!" he stuttered.

"A what?" It was Harry's turn to be intrigued.

"A Parselmouth! You must be evil, then. All Parselmouths are. You-Know-Who was!" At that time, Ron had retreated back to the room's door and was ready to bolt out. "After all, what tells me you didn't get a piece of him during your oh-so-famous fight?"

"Who knows who?" asked Harry, even more confused. "And what are you on about?"

"Vv... Vol... Voldemort!" Ron exclaimed, before shutting up, shrinking in fear as the room echoed the current Dark Lord's name.

Hermione had kept her cool, though, and took advantage of Ron's current state of distraction to aim her wand at him.

"Incarcerous."

Ron was promptly tied by the magical rope erupting from Hermione's wand, and the two others dragged him back to his chair.

"Good." she said. "Now we can discuss as human beings, not like scared bigots. First things first. What does Parselmouth mean? Enlighten us mere muggleborns, Oh your red-haired and pureblooded majesty."

Ron tried to force his bounds but it was to no avail and he slumped on his seat. "It's the name given to the ones able to speak Parseltongue, the snake language."

"That's a question I wanted to ask Harry. Was that snake language? Or Parseltongue or whatever name we choose?"

“Well... yes. I discovered recently that I could speak with my snakes.”

“Your snakes, Harry?”

“Back during the Christmas break, when you were choosing your birds, I got bored and found cages with snakes. Some were really beautiful and I bought three cages. The owner was giving them away, and I got a pretty discount.”

“Alright. Everybody can have his or her own pets.” she stated, blocking Ron’s retort by putting her hand on his mouth. “Now. Since you’ve been kind enough to tell us who is the You-Know-Who person you spoke about, Ron, can you tell us why it’s evil to speak Parseltongue?”

When she removed her hand, Ron looked at her as if she had lost her head. “You-Know-Who was one! It should be a sufficient proof!”

“No, no, no. That’s no proof, or you wizards have a different logic.” she started. “Was You-Know-Who a wizard?”

“Yes, but-”

“Are you a wizard?”

“Well... obviously! I don’t-”

“You are a wizard, he was a wizard. Does that make you evil?”

Ron was momentarily stumped, but he quickly retorted, although more weakly “Come on, Hermione, it’s snakes! Snakes are evil!”

“Why?” she demanded.

“Well... because! Slytherin’s emblem is a snake, and most of them have one as pet, too.”

“Granted, some Slytherin can be a pain in the rear.” she said, shocking both of them by her sudden frankness. “But have you met one of them truly evil?”

When he was looking around, visibly searching his mind for a name, she pressed the issue further. “What about Tracey? You have known her for several months, now. Is she evil?”

“Well, I don’t know what she was doing there, but-”

“She’s a victim, Ron.” Harry interrupted. “Nothing more, nothing less.” He straightened up. “Back to the topic. Are there many Parselmouths out there?”

Ron shrugged. “As they’re... I mean... As people think they are evil, those who are surely don’t show it. You’d better hide it, if you don’t want to be mobbed down Diagon Alley. To answer your question, it’s rumoured to be a rare... talent.”

Harry nodded and thought about it for a few second before launching another thread. “You spoke about my fight with Voldemort, Ron. Can you tell me what you know about it?”

Ron winced at the name, but complied nonetheless. “It’s in all the books about you that my mom used to read to Ginny. He killed your parents, and then cast the Unforgivable curse on you, but it rebounded and he was destroyed.”

“Oh.” said Harry, a bit dismayed that people could speak of his biological parent’s death with such detachment. “That fight.”

“Well... yes.” Ron answered. “There hasn’t been another, right? With Voldemort dead and all...”

“Well... I have a bad news for you, guys. I recently had a little... altercation... with someone.”

Ron had blanched. “You aren’t saying...”

Harry nodded. "Voldemort isn't dead."

Ron fainted.

Although she was trembling a little, Hermione raised her wand again.

"Enervate."

"Good spells." Harry said. "I should try that. When did you learn them?"

"I went a little ahead in Defence Against the Dark Arts." she replied, before returning to the current topic. "So, what happened?"

Harry spent the next ten minutes explaining about Snape and his attack. While Hermione wasn't looking happy that he had assaulted a teacher's mind, she didn't say anything.

"And that's how I don't know where he is. I checked Snape once – discreetly, mind you– and the dark shroud wasn't there anymore." He frowned and turned toward Ron. "I have a question for you. Your retelling of Voldemort... what?" he asked, noticing Ron's wince again.

"Just... just don't use his name."

"Why? He won't attack me right now?" said Harry. He stood up. "Voldemort! Voldemort!"

After a silent pause, he looked at Ron again. "See? Nothing. I don't think you should fear his name."

Ron wasn't convinced though. "Well... everybody says so, and-"

Hermione snorted, interrupting him. "If everybody jumps from the bridge, Ron, will you? I mean, without the rope..."

"You jump from a bridge attached to a rope?" asked Ron, his eyes wide in disbelief.

“Well, I didn’t, but some people do it.” she replied. “Adrenaline junkies, if you ask me.”

“You muggles are strange.” said Ron dejectedly, and the two other laughed. “What?”

“A wizard saying that muggles are strange.” said Hermione.

“Sure beats the opposite.” continued Harry. Seeing Hermione looking at him expectantly, he asked “What?”

“You were saying something about Ron’s retelling of Voldemort?”

“Err... Ah, yes! Ron, your story of my first run-in with Voldemort was very detailed.”

“Well, yes. Why?”

“How is it even possible? I mean... to have these precisions, and to know that Voldemort apparently died instead of just taking a stroll –for ten years, no less– means that somebody must have been there, watching the event and not acting.”

In the stunned silence, Hermione spoke up. “You know what, Harry?”

“No, what?”

“You’re right.”

And the stunned silence continued for several minutes.

Hermione cleared her throat before asking another question. “That got me thinking... You remember the Prophet article, Harry? There was a list of Dumbledore’s supposed mistakes. If Hagrid is as innocent as you said, would you trust Dumbledore’s actions?”

“What do you mean?”

“I speak about Sirius Black.” she answered, and continued, ignoring Ron’s gasp. “The article had the same derisive undertone in both cases, and Sirius Black had perhaps extenuating circumstances that Dumbledore was aware of, despite having killed Pettigrew and those mug-”

Harry jumped to his feet, effectively interrupting her. “That’s it!”

“What?”

“Another bit of news? I had a vision some time ago, and I saw Pettigrew alive. That man is probably someone close to Voldemort since he is currently lodging his spirit for free.”

“Harry?” asked Hermione.

“Yes?”

“I’m sure that the Headmaster could do something useful with everything you told us today.”

“Mmmm... You’re right, Hermione. As always, I should add. I’ll tell him something.”

Ron looked at him with a thoughtful frown. “I was wondering, Harry...”

When the redhead didn’t continue, Harry prodded him. “Yes?”

“Why are you so powerful? I mean... You certainly met the other first years, and you have fought against adults quite successfully. What’s your secret?”

Harry grinned. “A bowl of cereals and milk for breakfast.”

Hermione smiled but Ron was clearly confused, and Harry felt he had to give at least a bit of explanation instead of a muggle joke. “I don’t really know. There are fields of magic I’m really good at while others where I’m at everyone’s level, if not below.”

He reflected about it for several seconds before answering. "For as long as I can remember, I always have been able to do magic. Consciously, I mean. When you told us about your sister's accidental magic mishaps the other day, Ron, I found it strange, but it seems that everybody had these accidents at some point or another. Not me. For as far as I can remember, I have always been in control of my magic."

"How does that make you a more powerful wizard, Harry?" asked Hermione, always questing for knowledge.

"As I was always in control of it, I have been training it since... since forever, in fact. Experimenting with it also brought several other powers, like my mind. I also know that, in my mind, I have vague reminiscences about Voldemort's attack, and also about a plane, but these memories are incomplete, so I don't know what role they have. I only know they are linked to my power."

"A plane?" they both asked.

"Yes. I don't remember anything about it, though."

There were several seconds of silence, before Ron spoke again. "What is a plane?"

"It's a muggle flying engine." answered Hermione, visibly restraining herself from giving more details about planes.

"Muggles have flying engines?" Ron asked, paling. "Please don't tell my dad!"

"Why?" asked Harry.

"He's crazy with muggle machinery. His last major finding was eclecticity, and-"

"Electricity." said Hermione absently.

“Whatever.” Ron huffed. “He has been dismantling small devices for two years. I recall he was happy when a colleague told him these devices’ name last summer. Plugs.”

His two friends looked at each other in surprise, before bursting in laughter.

Ron looked at them annoyingly. “Laugh, laugh. Can I have my freedom back, now?”

Harry calmed down and smirked. “It depends, mate. Are you going to either attack me, flee me, or report me, or are you going to drop several of your prejudices?”

The redhead blushed. “Sorry, mate. I don’t think you are evil.”

While Hermione was casting a Finite Incantatem, making the ropes disappear, Harry grinned and asked his friend another question. “What would you have said if I told you I could speak with birds?”

“Can you?” asked Hermione. “Can you speak with birds?”

“Well... I don’t know, but I heard Quicksilver the other day, and its screeches seemed to have a meaning. Athina as well. I should try to speak to them in the near future.”

In the shocked silence, he asked “What? Is that truly a sign of evilness?”

“Well... no.” said Ron. “I found a Chocolate Frog Card once on a guy named Falco Ansalon or Aesealon – I don’t remember – and he had something about birds, but he wasn’t evil.”

“I’m relieved.” said Harry playfully. “Following Ron’s logic, I’m not evil, then.”

The three of them were laughing when they exited the Room of Requirement that evening.

To be continued in next chapter: The Light and the Shadows...

Much discussion caused slowness
Of the long writing process.
That's why the birds and snakes will
Go next and charge for the kill.

Chapter 14 – The Light and the Shadows

posted September 18th, 2005

The following week passed without incident. The teachers were extra careful to count the students for each course, and if one wasn't there on time, the Headmaster was called systematically. Lateness was then less and less tolerated, and many of the slower students saw points removed from their House. Curfew was moved up by half an hour, and students who had late detentions were brought directly back to their common room afterwards by the appropriate teacher.

The study group headed by Hermione, Harry, and Ron had taken another half hour to finalize their name, and had come up with "Students Allied in a Group for Excellence in Studies" (SAGES) and it had pleased them tremendously, even if Harry hid why he had pushed for "Allied." In his mind, the group would eventually include the Slytherins.

A short time afterwards, Harry decided put into application the decision he had taken in the train: he started to write a short article, intending to send it to the Daily Prophet as soon as it was manageable.

That Sunday morning saw Harry waking up all of a sudden. He looked around, but his dorm mates weren't making any unusual noise. There wasn't anything else going on, and he shook his head.

"I'm going mad." he muttered, before lying in his bed again. In no way was he going to let a perfect Sunday morning go to waste by not sleeping through it.

His wish for slumber was interrupted immediately when he heard the same sound that had awakened him.

"I smell blood."

It was a deep voice. So deep, that it seemed to come from the bowels of Earth itself and resounded in the whole room. At the same time, it had that hissing undertone that he remembered only coming from his

snakes when he talked to them. He decided to check the disturbance and put his clothes on. When he grabbed his robes, he found something in his pocket, and recuperated the mitten in which rested the cauldrons and egg he had taken from Hagrid the day before. He still didn't know what it was and the egg was still whole, which meant that the animal inside hadn't decided to show up yet.

Harry stowed the still warm mitten in his trunk and finished clothing himself, before rushing out of his common room. He tried to get Cassie to find the snake but she didn't seem able to locate it and Harry cursed. He would have to ask Cassie about that, but later. While he climbed stairs four steps at a time, he couldn't help wondering what he was going to do, actually. After all, a Basilisk was a deadly creature... If it found anyone...

Anyone...

Was there anyone to find?

Harry skidded to a halt in front of Myrtle's bathroom, and concentrated on his link to Cassie again, now focusing on finding people outside their quarters. After several anxious seconds, he got a reply and blushed because of it. It didn't prevent him from turning around and rushing in the stairs he had just left.

Paul Andrieux and Virginia Blates, both seventh-year Hufflepuffs, were having a close encounter in the Entrance Hall's broom closet. The place was renowned for being so right under Filch's nose that he never checked on it. Harry wondered why seventh years would seek such a reclusive place to... do it, but Cassie answered that question indirectly, indicating another romantically involved couple of Ravenclaws taking the equally renowned top of the Astronomy Tower, often labelled "The Lovers' Nest."

When Harry got the pictures of the two couples, courtesy of Cassie, he gasped in surprise and almost missed the next few steps. Recovering his balance, he hurried to the broom cupboard. He was now hearing the sound of scales rubbing against stone, and, throwing caution to the wind, he yanked the door open.

“Get out.” he hissed, not looking at the scene in front of him. Despite his control over his mind, he wasn’t sure of how he would react upon actually seeing the pair in the buff. The two others started to protest loudly but he repeated his request, adding magic to it.

“Get out! Now! There’s a Basilisk on the loose!” he hissed intently, before looking around. The sound of the beast’s snaking movements was getting louder, as were his words.

“Blood!” it was hissing. “Mud blood! Soiled blood! Miiiiiine!”

When Paul and Virginia saw him in this state, and when they heard the ominous sounds, they blanched and looked at each other in terror.

Harry was stuck. They didn’t seem compliant or even ready to run, especially as Paul was still having his pants around his ankles. He knew the dark creature was headed this way, and took the first exit door he could think of, cursing himself for not having thought about it earlier. He jumped forward, took Paul and Virginia’s hands, and Apparated out.

His first idea had been to stay there and wait for the beast to go away. It didn’t seem ready to, though, and Harry reflected that there was another couple of muggleborns in the Astronomy Tower, and that they would eventually leave that sanctuary, exposing them to the creature.

His thoughts rewound themselves suddenly.

Muggleborns!

The Basilisk’s primary targets were muggleborns! He almost kicked himself. Of course they were! It had even said it earlier.

Well, he still had two frightened students at his hands, and had to do something for the other couple, so he Apparated Paul and Virginia into Hufflepuff common room. Thankfully for their modesty, the room was currently deserted.

“What happened?” asked Paul while buttoning his pants. Virginia was holding his arm, hiding her womanly charms behind his burly frame.

Harry shook his head to clear it and sighed. Would the clean-up work ever cease? He went to the couple’s minds and removed anything related to him before Apparating out. The two of them recovered quickly enough for Virginia to rush to her dorms, mooning Paul and Harry in the process. It wasn’t as attractive in the greyness of the gaseous reality, though, Harry thought before heading toward the Entrance Hall again. The Basilisk was gone, but he was still hearing it, its rumbling voice resonating in the castle. Thinking about it, it was a miracle that the beast’s words didn’t wake more people.

He paused for a second. The Basilisk was too cumbersome to climb the steep steps of the Astronomy Tower, and would certainly wait downstairs. After a brief chat to Cassie, checking that nobody else was out and that the two lovers in the Astronomy Tower weren’t done yet, he went straight to the Headmaster’s office through the gaseous reality. Once there, not finding the man, he grabbed a blank piece of parchment and a quill, and wrote a quick note before disappearing again.

Erwan Kerouan and Renata di Luzio, both seventh-year Ravenclaws, were having a good time. Notwithstanding the act itself, they had just declared their undying love to each other in front of the rising sun. Being both able magically, they had charmed the blankets to provide enough warmth, and were looking at the sky peacefully, admiring the snowflakes falling around them. Harry noticed their peacefulness and decided that, short of a Basilisk climbing the steep stairs, he’d let them until they were ready to return to their rooms. He went down said stairs and noticed, as predicted, the Basilisk coiled at the end of it, ready to strike. Harry, still in the gaseous reality, positioned himself on said stairs too and waited.

And waited.

It was starting to be counterproductive, and Harry looked around, trying to find something to help him. It was at that moment that he noticed that none of the portraits were looking at the beast. They

didn't seem afraid but didn't seem able to actually see it. As if a powerful but specialized notice-me-not type of spell had been used on the beast.

Looking around, Harry also found the Astronomy classroom itself, its door closed. Harry, a plan forming in his head, went there to pick a sheet of parchment and a quill. After writing another short message, he used the best of his transfiguration abilities to transform the quill into a little pointy blade, halfway between a needle and a plain table knife. Leaving the classroom through the gaseous reality again, he went upstairs and discreetly Apparated in. After sticking the parchment with the blade on the wooden trapdoor, he Apparated out again and returned to check on the Basilisk. At least, he wouldn't find the two students barging in from upstairs, now.

Nothing happened for several long minutes, but when the sun struck the corridors' high windows, the Basilisk looked at it before zigzagging away. Harry followed it, and found out that the beast was having its own entranceways and exits in the school: when it hissed "open" at a nearby statue, it jumped aside, revealing a round tunnel where the large snake slithered in.

Harry stayed in front of the now-closed statue for a minute, lost in thoughts, before remembering the two lovers upstairs. Still intangible, he went there and noticed their frightened state.

"I thought you cast a perimeter charm to warn us of any intruders." the girl was saying.

"I did, Renata." answered Erwan. "I really did. And it's still active. Nobody passed through it."

"How do you explain this, then?" she asked, pointing at the bit parchment, visibly too scared to actually touch it.

"I don't know. Did you or didn't you lock the trapdoor?"

"I did!"

Harry was almost sad to have dampened their high spirits, and did a bit of mind clean-up again. His eyes unfocused, Erwan unlocked and opened the trapdoor, and the two of them left the tower smiling goofily, the message and its significance forgotten.

Harry became tangible and visible again, and fetched the message and the blade, absently reading the former a last time.

Don't leave, Filch camps in the stairs. I'll fetch you. – a friend

He smiled before putting them in one of his pockets. He had been sure that the Filch card would have worked better than an unknown and rumoured extinct dark creature, especially for knowledge-hungry Ravenclaws. Humming a happy tune, he walked back to his dorm. After everything that had happened, he had to take a shower. The Great Hall held its usual hubbub on that relaxed Sunday morning, but when Dumbledore marched through the doors toward the Head table, everybody could sense that something was wrong.

“Severus. Minerva. We need to talk.” he whispered, before exiting the hall through the side door, the two addressed Heads in tow.

“I firecalled Filius and Pomona. They are coming too.” he said, walking briskly toward his office.

Once there, he spoke the password and they all filed in. Instead of conjuring the usual tea set on the small table, he put the parchment he had been holding there.

“I found it this morning.” he said, looking outside through the window, while they bent closer to be able to read it. “It was on my desk. The door was locked for the night.” he removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose, before turning around.

“Any idea?” he asked.

“Did the portraits notice anything?” asked Flitwick.

“It seems that they were sleeping.” answered Dumbledore. “Pictures of previous Headmasters seldom wake unless people actually pass the door or ask a direct question.”

There was a pause, during which each Head examined the message.

“It’s awfully short.” commented Sprout. “It looks like it had been written in a hurry... as if...” she looked up, startled. “As if the author really had a part in this.”

“Either attacking or defending, though.” noted Snape, snatching the parchment from the Herbology professor. “I’m still uneasy about the accusation, though. These are from my house, and-”

They were surprised by a loud knock.

“Enter.” said Dumbledore after having recovered the message from Snape’s hands.

The caretaker entered the room, a strange package in his hands and a leering grin decorating his scared face. “Ye might like what I found this morning, in one of the broom cupboards.” He raised his arms, and his frilly package unfolded. The teachers gasped, Sprout crying in outrage. It was a complete set of clothing for a student. A Hufflepuff female student, visibly. With school robes, skirt, shirt, and undergarments.

“The cupboard was open. Seems that our troublemakers got distracted before finishing whatever they were doing. I even recuperated two wands.”

Sprout paled considerably. She took the proffered clothes from Filch’s dirty hands and started to search them.

“What are you doing, Pomona?” asked McGonagall gently. After all, after the message, what Filch had said implied a grim meaning. The girl could very well be dead, and her partner as well.

“Got it!” exclaimed Sprout, retrieving a small journal from one of the robe’s pockets. She fumbled with its lock unsuccessfully, before Snape helped her.

“Alohomora.”

“Thank you, Sev.” she said, not caring about the Potion Master’s feelings upon being given a shortened forename. She glanced at the first page, and showed it to Dumbledore. “That’s her! I knew that I knew them! Can you find her, Albus?” she half-asked, half-pleaded.

The Headmaster nodded, and grasped his pendant.

“I guess I’ve nothing more to do here.” grumbled Filch, who, seeing the lack of answer, rolled his eyes and left the office.

Dumbledore suddenly smiled, and opened his eyes. “She’s alive. She’s in Hufflepuff seventh year boys’ dorm, apparently being comforted by the young lad without wand whose forename we already have.”

The portly witch had already bolted upright, and was at the door even before he finished his sentence.

“Wait, Pomona!” she paused at the door, but it was clear for everyone that she wouldn’t wait long.

Dumbledore summoned his most caring smile. “Can you bring them here?”

She thought about it. For half a second. And nodded. Then she was gone. While the door was closing slowly after her, the four others could hear the indignant yell of Filch being moved around by the portly woman. When someone or something threatened her House, Sprout could be a true force of nature.

“Thank god Hufflepuffs are Hufflepuffs.” sighed Snape. “I don’t want to know what this fierceness could do with the vaunted Gryffindor bravery.”

McGonagall scowled, but it was Flitwick who answered. "You know what? If you just add Ravenclaw resourcefulness and Slytherin stealth in the mix, you'd have a formidable person."

Snape looked up, startled. "I wasn't..." he stopped suddenly, frowning.

"Severus?" prodded Dumbledore.

The black-clad Potion Master looked up. "I wasn't necessarily speaking about one person. You all know a group of students who don't seem to care the slightest bit about House divisions."

They all fell silent for a few minutes, remembering.

"These names," started Snape, interrupting the pause and showing the Headmaster's message, "can you locate them, Albus? I know they are from my House, but you'll be faster."

Dumbledore grasped his pendant again, and frowned. "Most strange."

"What?"

"I picked only two of them. They are in their dorm. Sleeping, apparently. The third one is... she's just not there."

McGonagall frowned. "Like Mister Tho-"

Whatever she intended to say was interrupted by the returning Herbology professor, leading two of her students. "Here we are, kids. Don't be afraid."

"Come in, come in." Dumbledore said kindly, before conjuring two more chairs.

"Are we in trouble, sir?" asked a white-faced Paul, while Virginia was clasping his arm, on the verge of tears. They both had noticed her clothes, her journal, and their wands on the table.

“Not at all, my dear boy.” the Headmaster answered, still smiling. “We just want to hear your story. Tell us, Paul, Virginia. Tell us what happened.”

The voice was almost hypnotic, and the old man’s twinkle was strong, strangely compelling them to tell the truth. Unbeknownst to them, Dumbledore had also made a head sign to Snape beforehand and the Potion Master was carefully sifting through their memories at the same time. There wasn’t much to say, actually, and the two of them left with their stuff soon afterwards. The relieved students gone, the other professors’ annoyance reached their faces and they began to discuss the tale, but Dumbledore held an imperious hand, wanting the advice of the still silent man.

“Severus?”

He looked up, startled. “Yes?”

“First of all, do you share my guess that they told the truth?”

Snape thought about it for a few seconds, and it unnerved the others quite a bit. The man was known for his harsh judgements, and such a yes-or-no question would have been answered in a heartbeat.

“For all I know, yes.” he stated, before looking at them. “But their memories are unclear at some point, and I especially don’t see any girl going back to her dorm through the corridors, stark naked. Even the daring Gryffindors wouldn’t pull that.” He thought about it again and amended himself. “Unless cursed, of course.”

While she wanted to retort something, McGonagall could only nod. No girl in her right mind... she shuddered. “Had she been subjected to the Imperius, Severus?”

“No.” he replied at once.

“That was a quick answer.” commented Sprout.

Snape rubbed the back of his neck. "Well... I saw many victims of this curse and it leaves a particular feeling which should appear in the victim's memories. Here, it just seems that the two of them had their memories altered."

"How?" asked Flitwick. "And to what extent?"

"Their memories of going from the cupboard to Hufflepuff cellar have been altered. I'd say that the person who did this was fairly good, as he or she replaced the original memories with indistinct images of walking in unrecognisable corridors." Snape didn't see Dumbledore's sharp look at that moment, and continued. "There's something that the Legilimencer –or Obliviator– failed to suppress completely, though."

"And it is...?" asked Sprout, internally screaming at the man's rhetoric.

"A feeling of fear." he replied. "Deep, primal, overwhelming fear. Those two have been terrorized like never before."

The five adults paused and looked at each other. In a way, it confirmed the message.

Snape stood up. "I'll fetch the two students you saw, Albus. I already interrogated them, but perhaps I missed a crucial information." he stated, before exiting the room.

After a couple of minutes, Dumbledore spoke again. "When Severus spoke about fuzzy memories, it reminded me of another student. You know who I'm talking about. I think we should have another meeting with him soon."

"Can you reach him now?" asked Sprout, but Dumbledore shook his head. He had already checked during the previous pause.

"We'll have to wait for him to show himself at the next meal, then." said Flitwick. "I don't think it would be wise to tour the whole castle searching for him. With that animal on the loose..."

“Albus...” started McGonagall in a tightly controlled voice, “Is it true? Is it even possible?”

“I don’t know, Minerva.” the aged man answered, frowning. “But it would answer many questions, while asking new ones.”

He looked at the message once more. It was short and to the point, but it also offered a bit of hope.

Basilisk in school. Seems to target Muggleborns first. Hogwarts can’t locate it. Millicent Bulstrode, Pansy Parkinson, and Daphne Greengrass entered the Chamber of Secrets. Just relocated Paul and Virginia. Got to go, another couple in Astronomy Tower.

Harry took a long and refreshing shower and clothed for the day. For some reason, he suspected that the Basilisk wouldn’t appear in a school full of people, and decided to take advantage of it. He also knew that wizarding shops weren’t like muggles and rarely closed on Sundays, and he intended to leave the school and buy something to help against the giant snake. Walking boots on his feet and a hooded travelling cloak in his bag, he headed for the Great Hall to take a belated breakfast.

When he arrived, he couldn’t miss the emptiness of the head table and asked Susan about it while sitting next to her.

“Dumbledore arrived early,” she replied, “and McGonagall and Snape followed him out at once. I didn’t see Sprout or Flitwick either.”

“Hmm hmmm.” he answered, knowing full well why the old wizard would need his close advisors. He then started to demolish the content of the breakfast dishes in front of him, to Susan’s awe and concern.

“Harold?” she asked after a moment.

“Yes?” he answered, before swallowing and repeating “Yes?”

“You seem awfully hungry this morning.”

“Yes.” he said, his eye glinting in amusement, before returning to his eggs and bacon.

She looked at him in annoyance for a second. “Harold!”

He looked up but she didn’t give him the time to answer. Given that he had just taken another spoonful of eggs, it would have been disgusting anyways.

“Swallow first, then tell me why you are that hungry. If you please.”

He obeyed. “I did some sports before breakfast.” he said truthfully, before lying outright. “And when I was running around the lake, I think I saw a large patch of fluxweed. I want to check it out, and explore the grounds a bit to see if there are other interesting things. Want to join?”

He knew she had something else scheduled, which was why he had dared asking the question. For what he intended to do today, he didn’t want anyone around him. Giving his friend an explanation could help his case if some people wondered about where he was.

Susan was really contemplating her options, though. On the one hand, she wanted to spend some quality time with her friend, while, on the other hand, Megan and Hannah had recruited her earlier for an all-girls session of reading Witch Weekly and gossiping. The incoming post owls decided for her, as today’s issue of her favourite magazine fell on her knees.

A screech came from over them. “Move aside! I got a message for my master!”

Harry and Susan looked up, the latter recognizing Harry’s grey falcon while the former finally processed something new. He could understand his messenger bird! And, given the sudden raise in the surrounding volume of voices, he was able to do so with other birds as well. Looking around, he noticed that several owls had landed in front of his red-haired Gryffindor friend and, remembering that the

boy's birthday was today, he vowed to himself to find something for him.

He didn't want to speak to Quicksilver right now, in fear that his speech would transform in screeching and hooting noises – in the same way his voice changed when addressing snakes. He thus decided to leave the hall as quickly as manageable. Thank Merlin, he had been stuffing his face before or he'd still be famished.

Like the previous time, he magically strengthened his skin and raised an arm for Quicksilver to perch on. He took the letter, knowing that it was from his family, and gave several scraps to his bird. After exchanging leaving pleasantries with Susan, he left the room, the falcon on his shoulder.

On his way to the Entrance Hall, he opened his letter and started to read it.

Dear Harold,

Thank you for your last letter. We know that it mustn't be easy, with lessons and everything going on. Our mutual friend told us about your problem and we hope that nothing prevents your scraps from healing.

Harry snorted. Alison must have pressed upon them to avoid or hide too revealing topics, and they were doing it quite masterfully. He passed the open doors, noticing that several students were on the grounds already. All the better for my alibi, he thought. Keeping on walking, he continued his letter, remembering his family's false names as he went.

Jason got into a fight once, but I must say his Karate lessons are fruitful: he returned home with only a black eye while the three ruffians got whipped. Emma and Kathleen are still clinging together despite our attempts to give them a proper identity. They are finishing each other's sentences all the time, and it's unsettling.

George has taught Jason a bit more about robotics, and we constantly have little critters moving everywhere on the house.

Victoria is now resting, after her weeklong tour of Spain. I'd swear the woman is untiring, but that would wake her.

Genni comes from time to time but her work is demanding and she stays mostly at her flat. She once told us that her boss was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Physics partly thanks to her work in particle detectors. It really is good for her, isn't it?

Mustafa is happy as ever. Two days ago, he helped a mare give birth for the first time and showed us pictures of the foal. The man is as proud as if it was his own. Our other friends will give you news by themselves.

I hope everything is going well for you. Until next time we meet, take care of you. And do hex your favourite teacher if he keeps scowling (you know which one). Teachers aren't meant to scowl. I must relinquish the pen, as Jason is almost throwing a fit, now.

Love,

Grace

Harry smiled. It was fun to have news about his family from time to time. He knew he could write more often, but his current problem was 60 feet long, hissing, and demanding. His steps had brought him near the lake, now, and he turned so that he'd start walking around it and started to decipher his brother's uneven script.

The magical one,

I trashed them! Yay me! Seriously, thank you for having helped me when we were... you know where. Mom is watching what I write and she told me I couldn't speak about... you know. Anyway. Did I tell you I trashed them? Oh yes I did. George is cool! My legobots are too small, though, and the grown-ups always walk on them. Except George. And I trashed three big kids! They wanted my jacket and Lucy's purse but I trashed them! Lucy was so proud! Ah yes. Lucy is my friend, now. You have a girlfriend? Mom says I must stop or I'll write on the table because the paper isn't getting longer. Pity. You have magical paper which does that?

See you soon,

The one who trashed them

Harry laughed out loud at the end. Jamie could be so... exuberant, sometimes.

“What’s the meaning of these sounds, master?” asked a voice near him.

Harry almost jumped, but he remembered his falcon. He looked around but nobody was there, and he talked back.

“It means I’m happy.” he said, before shaking his head. His voice seemed normal to his own ears, not like when he spoke the snake language. “Strange.”

“What is strange?”

“I don’t seem to screech like you.” he said absently, before registering something. “Hey! You understood me?”

“Of course I did!” the bird answered. “Even if you weren’t able to talk to me, the magical birds always understand the magical humans.”

“Even if...” Harry pondered. “Did you just say that I can be understood by non-magical birds?” he asked.

“I don’t know, master. It was only a guess. Your voice carries intonations that are necessary for a conversation between birds, and the other humans lack that. And I’m happy you understand me. I have much to say about my current living arrangements.”

Harry chuckled. Trust some creature you are just able to chat with to explain grievances!

“What do you want?” he asked, still walking.

“It’s just about the one you called Rudy.”

“What about him?”

“He snores.”

Harry laughed again.

When he was calm again, he addressed his falcon again. “Alright. I’ll talk to Ron about it. Can you go there for the moment?”

“That I can, master.”

“And stop calling me master, please.”

“That I can’t, master.” answered the stubborn bird before taking flight.

Harry sighed. What was it with his pets keeping calling him master?

He looked around him, and noticed that no one was near. He continued to walk toward the edge of the Forbidden Forest, and remembered Hagrid. The Aurors hadn’t left his hut, yet, and the unattended vegetable patches were starting to get covered in moss and eaten by miscellaneous critters. He decided that, once his purchases were bought, he’d check about the hopefully temporarily demoted groundskeeper’s state.

Once he was in the nearby tree’s shade, he extracted his coat from his bag and put it on. He then concentrated on his morphing abilities, increasing his height and bulk before changing his face and hair. That way, he didn’t have to pull the hood over his face as he’d be unrecognised anyways. Knowing that his mind could be probed by people around, he also updated it a bit, changing his name in the way.

Jerry P. Homest, a tall 50-year old man with a proud moustache, Apparated away, heading for Diagon Alley.

It took him a couple of minutes to travel to the busy street and to locate a shadowy recess in there. He shimmered into view, and tried to find an optometrist, following the unknown advice "get glasses for the king of snakes". There was one located right in front of Flourish and Blott's and he entered it.

"Good morning, sir." said the young helper. It was a young man, much older than Harry was in reality, but much younger than Harry's current shape looked like. "Can I help you?"

"I'm searching for glasses, but I don't want them broken, rendered unusable by rain, or lost."

"I can help you with that, sir." said the man.

"I'm sure you can. Do you have a brochure on all the special abilities that can be added to glasses?"

"Special abilities, sir?"

"Yes. Unbreakable, impervious to rain... that sort of things. Since I'm buying magical glasses, I want to know what you can imbue them with."

"Oh." the man seemed thoughtful. "You're right, then. I'll fetch the owner."

He got out of the room before Harry could say anything.

Several minutes passed by and Harry began to feel restless, when the back door opened again and a beautiful woman entered the room. She looked at Harry and stopped suddenly. Tilting her head to the side, she stared at him for several seconds, and Harry felt his "I'm being observed" feeling coming back full force.

" Bloody Merlin on a pike! I'll be damned!" she exclaimed unexpectedly, surprising both Harry and the shop aide.

After another uncomfortable pause, she turned back to the man behind her. "It will be all, Sean. Take your morning off."

The addressed Sean looked at her uneasily but she nodded and he left the shop. The woman followed him to the door and, after a brief look outside, locked it and closed all the curtains.

She then looked at Harry through her glasses and smiled.

"How are you doing, Mister Harry Potter?"

At the same time, in the Italian part of the Alps mountain range...

The wonderful morning scenery of the Dolomites, around the town of Cortina di Ampezzo, was breathtaking. It didn't take more than a few seconds for the director to enjoy it, though.

"Okay, people, time to move on. Let's get this scene done!"

The actors got in place, ready to continue their current job. Lithgow and Stallone stood face to face, both in a pink tutu.

"Cliffhanger, scene 183, take 4!" yelled one of the technicians, and the play unfolded. At the same time, Harlin was wondering if the scene was actually useful for the plot. Maybe not, he thought.
Erin Yeates' Eyewear Shop...

'Fuck! Darn bloody fuck!'

Harry was screaming in his own mind. How could he be uncovered like this? On unsteady legs, he stepped forward until he could grab a desk for support.

His mind was churning. His first approach in this case would have been to Oblivate the person immediately, but he was curious as well. At the same time, he couldn't very well leave her with that knowledge.

"If you move," he started, his voice cold, "I'll Oblivate you."

“Come on, Harry, you can’t-” she tried to say in a patronizing way.

“How do you think I’ve been able to stay hidden all this time?” he asked, his voice still conveying the threat.

She looked at him and he could almost see gears turning in her head. “Very well.” she said, straightening up. “What do you need?”

“I originally wanted a special set of glasses, but since you seem to have uncovered me, I want to know how you did it and I want to know how I can protect myself from it.”

She looked at him, visibly pondering how much she should tell him, and he decided to increase the pressure.

“I could take this information directly from your mind, you know. But I’m not interested by whatever sexually-oriented memories the adults’ minds are generally cluttered with. And I don’t want to damage your other memories either. Yet.”

She had started to relax, but his last word saw her frozen in her spot.

“It’s...” she started, and gulped. Even in his normal shape, the boy was intimidating. “It’s the glasses.”

“The glasses?”

“Yes.” Now that she had started, she practically blabbed. “My glasses are charmed with every spell existing, and even some I invented, and I saw you in your normal shape. When I noticed your famous scar, I couldn’t help but recognize you.”

“Alright.” he answered after a few seconds digesting the information. “Which are those spells and which ones detected me?”

“I have all the usual spells, but I think the ones that interest you most are the ones to see the true form of Animagi and Metamorphmagi, plus the ones seeing through concealment, glamour, disillusionment, or invisibility charms or items.”

He nodded. "Are these options available to the general public?"

"The anti-invisibility and anti-concealment are sold to Aurors only. The anti-Animagi and anti-Metamorphmagi aren't even known as I only recently perfected them. The lack of willing test candidates hindered my research."

"Very well," he answered, knowing that it was the truth. "How can I circumvent this?"

"Err... I don't think you can. I mean... you could detect the signature of the spell and blind it, but I would still detect that something is amiss."

"Hmmm... Can you charm an item so that it would do the trick? A ring, perhaps?"

"I could, but it would take some time. Two months, I'd say. And only if I work on it full-time."

"I can pay. Don't release your new model before then, please," he thought about it, before adding "Or you can release it, but without the Metamorphmagi part. As I said," he raised his hand, sensing the upcoming argument, "I can pay for your time lost."

She reluctantly agreed. "What else can I do for you? I don't suppose you came here to slow my business only, and I remember you talking about glasses."

"Yes. I want glasses that can stop the glare of a Basilisk."

She looked at him with wide eyes for a few seconds before erupting in laughter.

"What?" he asked, rather annoyed.

Her laughter subsided. "It's just that it just can't be done! And there's no reason for it to be done either. Basilisk breeding has been

declared illegal in every magical community, and the knowledge of stopping their gaze has been seized the Ministry long before my birth. I'm sorry I can't do it. Besides, there's no more Basilisk alive, is it?"

Harry was rather annoyed at that point, and he didn't even answer her. How could he defeat the creature without being turned to stone or killed himself if he didn't have the glasses?

The answer struck him like lightning. Hermione had made the appropriate research about the beast and had shared her findings with him a few days before.

Cocks!

The male chicken, also known as cockerels, or roosters in the part of the world called America, could produce a crowing cry which was lethal to Basilisks!

Harry focused on the woman and entered her immediate memories.

He was also unsure that countering the glasses would be a good idea in and out of itself. After reading the woman's mind a bit more, he found out that there were only few Metamorphmagi in the world. The woman had included that bit to her glasses through sheer pride in her work, and had tested them against an Auror Metamorphmagus, visibly. Deciding that it would be too dangerous for him and the Auror, Harry transferred the memories of that specific charm from the woman's mind to his own. He would give them back when he'd be sure the world was safe. He also took her glasses, intent on using them himself, and left her with a large sum as payment for his less-than-legal actions.

Swiftly exiting the store, he went straight to the Magical Menagerie.

He got out fifteen minutes later, his ears still ringing from the sheer noise that was filling the store, and without any success in finding any species related to chicken. The shopkeeper couldn't even inform him on where to find some.

Grumbling, he was walking toward the Leaky Cauldron when a sign on a house nearby caught his attention.

The Daily Prophet Headquarters.

He grinned. Thankfully, he hadn't removed some of the loose parchments from his bag, and he took one out before heading to Florean Fortescue's ice cream parlour. Fifteen minutes later, he could be seen entering the newspaper's building.

"Good day, sir." the receptionist said in a pompous voice. "What can you do for our publication?"

Harry was mildly shocked. Was that the Daily Prophet? If the woman's words and tone were anything to go by, they sure considered themselves the centre of the world.

"I have an exclusive interview." he said.

"Everybody has." she answered, still turning and twisting a quill in her nervous fingers. "Who?"

"Harry Potter."

"I'm suuure you have." she said in a derisive manner. "Show me." she said, extending her hand.

He didn't want to, but she was playing her guarding act to the perfection and he knew he couldn't get past her without her consent. Whether it was voluntary or not didn't matter, though. Nevertheless, he decided to keep his powers in check for the time being and showed her the parchment. She scanned it and her eyes narrowed.

"Is it genuine?" she asked, not looking him in the eye.

He rolled his eyes. "Yes, madam."

She seemed irresolute for several seconds, before giving his parchment back.

“Come with me.” she said, cutting his upcoming remark before it was uttered.

Three hours afterwards, Harry left the building with another parchment making him richer by several hundreds Galleons. During his meeting with Rick Richman, the Daily Prophet’s manager, he had been subjected to Herbert Bourne, the journal’s official Legilimencer. It hadn’t been difficult to create the appropriate false memories, and the man had confirmed his story. Richman had been happy to separate from a few hundred Galleons, merely considering them pocket money compared to the income a Daily Prophet issue involving Harry Potter could generate.

Harry’s story would reach tomorrow’s edition cover, eclipsing Rita Skeeter’s article on Hagrid’s disappearance. The wizarding press world being quite small, one survived by eating one’s contenders. Figuratively, of course: Harry wasn’t going to eat Rita Skeeter.

Passing in front of Quality Quidditch Supplies, Harry remembered Ron’s birthday and he bought him a snitch, decorated in the violent orange colour of Ron’s favourite team: the Chudley Cannons.

The apothecary was just before the brick archway to the Leaky Cauldron and Harry stopped there as well, buying several batches of fresh fluxweed and other useful herbs that were common in Scotland – giving himself a safe alibi. Since it was nearing lunchtime and since the Leaky Cauldron wasn’t far, Harry decided to grab a bite there and to head to muggle London afterwards.

It took him the most part of the remaining daytime to find a farm where he could buy live roosters. Not being sure of their efficiency in the crowing department, he even bought a dozen of them. As soon as he found a remote place with nobody around, he tested the fact that they would crow upon seeing a bright light, and shrunk the large cage to fit in his schoolbag. He then Apparated out, heading for the school.

When he found himself back in Hogwarts, dinner was just starting but he had two other tasks to complete first, so he went to the Owlery first, and, smiling at the reaction it would get, sent Rudy with his birthday

present and a quickly scribbled note. As it was by internal mail, the eagle wouldn't wait for the next day delivery and it was sure to draw even more attention to Ron's birthday.

He then went to the kitchens, conveniently placed near Hufflepuff common room, and took several sandwiches, a couple grilled chickens, a few cakes, and a corked bottle of pumpkin juice from the delighted house-elves. After shrinking all this, he Apparated towards the Forbidden Forest. He found Hagrid quite easily, the man seeming not to have exited the clearing where he had been dropped. The only difference was the small hut there, made of large trunks.

"Hagrid." he called, Apparating in.

Oops, wrong move. A bolt shot past him and embedded itself in a nearby tree.

"What are ye doing here?" the man asked, looking left and right. "And who are ye? I never saw ye before."

"I'm Jerry." Harry answered, using his most recent pseudonym. After all, he was still morphed as the 50-years old reporter. "Just relax, Hagrid. I'm not from the Ministry, and I wasn't followed. I just wanted to make sure you were fine, and-"

"I'm fine." the half-giant grunted, but his haunted look denied it.

"-and I also wanted to share a little bit of this." he said, enlarging the shrunk meal.

Hagrid looked stunned for a second, his eyes wide, before lunging toward the meal. Harry was a little sad. The man was able to survive there, but he wouldn't be able to live long if nobody brought him anything. Picking a sandwich and reflecting about things, he decided to bring him a meal at least once a day.

His sandwich finished, he left the unsuspecting man and changed back into Harold Thomson's body and identity before heading back to Hogwarts for the night.

The next day, Harry woke up late and missed breakfast. It wasn't unusual for Mondays since the Ravensclaws and Hufflepuffs didn't have anything before Charms, at 10:30am. Others didn't miss it, though, and he would find two irate friends later.

Once in the classroom, though, Harry found a very upset teacher looking at him.

"Mister Thomson, you will come with me." he said, stepping down his desk where he had the habit to stand to teach. "The rest of you practise last week's shrinking and enlarging charms. Miss Granger, Mister Finch-Fletchley, you know the spell already. You are in charge."

And he left the room, a bewildered Harry in tow.

Once in front of the gargoyle guarding the Headmaster's office, Flitwick looked at the boy inquiringly for half a second before speaking. "You have been here before, Mister Thomson. Why don't you lead the way?"

Harry started a shrug, but the diminutive man's voice told him that something wasn't quite right. He looked at the gargoyle but focused on the man's mind. To his shock, it wasn't protected at all! He had always thought that Snape's protections were customary for teachers. He browsed through the man's memories and discovered the password for the gargoyle. Just as he was going to leave Flitwick's mind, he found something else behind that memory. Apparently, the password had been changed that very morning. He couldn't very well use it, as nobody told him. He fetched the old one and returned to his own body.

"Mars bars." he said.

Nothing happened.

He looked at Flitwick in apparent surprise, and the man looked at him inquiringly before sighing. Harry felt that he had just passed a test. He shuddered internally. If they were that close to discovering him...

“Blood-favoured lollipops.” said Flitwick. Harry grimaced at the choice but followed him through the stairs.

“I found him, Albus.” Flitwick said once inside the cosy room. “He was in my class on time. I’ll leave him to you, I do have a class.”

“Indeed.” said Dumbledore, looking at Harry. “Thank you, Filius.”

The man gone, the Headmaster looked at Harry, his eyes twinkling like mad. “Now, mister Thomson. It seems that we keep asking the same questions to you. Where were you yesterday?”

No more Cliffhanger scene, I promise.

“Err... did you speak with my friends, Headmaster?” Harry asked. “Because I told Susan that I found a good place to harvest some fluxweed. I did gather some of it and found other herbs nearby. I guess I got carried away by that, as when I looked up again, dinnertime was almost over.”

When Dumbledore didn’t answer anything, looking at him thoughtfully, Harry continued. “I still have them in my trunk, if you wish, Headmaster.”

The boy understood that the aged professor was trying to gather evidence from his mind and let him parse through his fake memories. After a moment, he knew he had to play the act, and he looked at Dumbledore intently. “Headmaster?”

The aged wizard seemed to wake up when Harry addressed him directly. “Hmmm? What?”

“I said I had them in my trunk. Do you want to see them?”

“See what?”

Harry almost rolled his eyes at this. "The batches of herbs I picked up yesterday. Fluxweed, asphodel, knotgrass, and belladonna. I still have them, as I wanted to show them to Professor Sprout tomorrow, during our Herbology period. Do you want to see them?"

Dumbledore, recovering his usual self, smiled benignly at his student. "No, thank you. I'm sure your Head of House will be more than delighted by these."

"As you wish, sir. Will it be all?"

"Yes. Yes, Mister Thomson. It will be all."

"I have a question, then, sir."

"Go ahead."

"Like several people on the train back from Christmas break, I read the Daily Prophet's slander campaign against you. Rita Skeeter's, more specifically. Since she seems to have put both Hagrid and Black on the same evilness pedestal, I wondered what you thought about both, sir. Especially now that Hagrid is hiding in the Forbidden Forest."

"How do you know Hagrid is hiding?"

"That's what you said, sir. You said that he had left for "one of his usual errands" and that, as groundskeeper, he had to visit the Forbidden Forest regularly. Just when Aurors show up at his doorstep. It had been a week, sir, and my friends and I reasonably thought he was hiding. Now, if you don't agree with that..."

"It's alright, really." answered Dumbledore, his mind spinning. How comes the boy was able to sort through things like this?

"We know, sir. We know that Hagrid wouldn't do harm to a kitten." he said, before pausing for a few seconds. "What about Black? The paper said you wanted to defend his case in the same way as Hagrid's."

Dumbledore sighed. "It's much more complicated. In Sirius' case – Sirius Black, I mean – there have been overwhelming evidence of him killing his friend Peter Pettigrew and a dozen muggles after having betrayed the Potters. I tried to defend him, but the Ministry wanted a Death Eater's head." his gaze suddenly got a faraway look. "I remember when the Potters got into hiding. I taught the Fidelius spell to Lily and she cast it using Sirius as Secret Keeper, and..."

The old man seemed to return to the present suddenly. "Sorry, Mister Thomson. It's not a happy-ending story."

"If you allow me to comment, sir, you were telling it very well." He grinned. "Have you ever thought about replacing Binns?"

Dumbledore smiled too, before scolding him gently. "It's Professor Binns, Mister Thomson."

Harry looked thoughtful suddenly.

"What is it?" Dumbledore enquired.

"I was wondering, sir. The Wizarding World suspected that Black was used as Secret Keeper but there are no proofs because the person casting the Fidelius is dead. We suspect Black killed Pettigrew and those muggles but we have no proof either, because Pettigrew's body was never found. Or so say the papers. They said his finger was found on the site, but that's all. Is there such a spell able to make a whole person disappear save one finger?" He looked up at the old man's startled face. "I'm just trying to think logically, sir. Am I wrong so far?"

Dumbledore took a moment to answer. "I don't know, Mister Thomson. I don't know." Internally, his mind was churning on a problem a decade old. Sirius Black had been the most obvious choice, but... what if the Potters hadn't used the most obvious choice, back then? He was so absorbed that he didn't notice Fawkes' fiery arrival. The regal bird trilled annoyingly, and it startled him out of his gloomy thoughts. Not noticing Harry's equally startled look, the man fetched

the message from Fawkes' leg and pocketed it. Certain things were best opened alone.

He cast a glance at the waiting boy and couldn't prevent a chuckle from escaping his lips. Harry's eyes were wide as saucers and he was looking at the bird in awe.

"This," Dumbledore said, "is Fawkes, my phoenix."

"I'm not your phoenix, Albus. You are my human." answered Fawkes in his usual trilling manner.

Harry blinked, blinked again, and laughed, startling both the Headmaster and his bird.

"What is it, Mister Thomson?" asked Dumbledore.

"Well, sir, he seems so... regal, and he appeared so... annoyed when you said he was yours, that I imagined him saying you were his, instead. Sorry." he finished, blushing and looking at his feet. Internally, he was furious. How could he have let that escape?

His lie about imagining things seemed good enough, though, and Dumbledore smiled. "Yes, it could very well be that way." he said, patting Fawkes gently.

Fawkes' next trill elicited no more reaction from Harry's well-schooled mind, and Dumbledore dismissed him soon after. The old man was itching to read the message. Was Mad-Eye having much chance in his search?

The letter was short and to the point. And written in true Mad-Eye style.

Chief,

Nest found. Birds and eggs gone. Found rangers hiding tracks. You join for a meeting?

Dumbledore frowned. It wasn't good. If mere muggles were successfully hiding tracks of Harry Potter's moves, it was going to be harder than he thought. He vanished the parchment and turned toward his faithful phoenix.

"Can you take me there, Fawkes?" he asked.

He was sure that the trill he received had a meaning but, whatever it was, the bird jumped on his shoulder and they both disappeared in a flash of fire.

Marseilles, France...

Mikhail Primakov wasn't happy.

Just the year before, he was a KGB office agent, but the collapse of the Soviet Union had transformed that, and the KGB was now split into different services. One of them, the newly-created Sluzhba Vneshney Razvedki, treated the foreign intelligence, and was headed by his uncle Yevgeni. Mikhail's career had then obtained a boost like never before. Despite all this, the SVR agent couldn't do anything more than glare, and glare he did, staring at the old man in front of him in what he hoped was an intimidating manner.

Internally, though, he was screaming in disgust at his own powerlessness and incomprehension. The man had approached a closely-guarded property in Beausoleil, triggering the alarms. When they had come inside, they found no one. But the door locked itself behind them, and they all fell, one after the other. His whole team was now aligned, standing against the wall like mere statues. Two of them had their eyes open and the green froth around their mouths told Mikhail that they had used the poisonous device hidden in their teeth to free themselves from the situation. Definitively.

He hadn't been authorized the luxury of using it, though. He was completely paralysed. The man in front of him, with his scars and unnerving rotating eye, had uttered a few words and a strange beam of light had enveloped him. He was... waiting?

Suddenly, in a display of fire, another man appeared, much older than the first although he was visibly less battle-weary. How could

one fight in this magician's disguise was a mystery to the secret service agent. The man wore it as if it was natural, though, and his stance showed power and the ability to use it. Mikhail's eyes widened even more. What was happening?

They discussed together but he couldn't understand what they were saying. Despite the fact that they were speaking English and that he could understand the language, there were so many unusual words in their heated discussion that he failed to grasp its sense. At one time, the scarred one pointed at the two dead comrades, then at his mouth. He made moves to encompass the whole group of agents and then pointed at him. The older one nodded gravely and took several items from his pockets. A small bottle... A stack of paper... A quill... A lit candle?

Even if Mikhail had been able to move, he was now completely stunned, stumped by the scene. The scarred one approached him with the flask, and yanked his mouth open. While he was putting some of the bottle's content on his tongue, the older one was speaking at the same time, and Mikhail's last conscious thought was to ask himself how the quill was able to move by itself on the paper.

"Do you speak English? Do you understand me?" asked Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody.

"Yes. Yes." was the answer, uttered in a plain voice.

"What's your full name?"

"Mikhail Gregorovitch Primakov."

"Who are you working for?"

Moody and Dumbledore could only watch in awe as the muggle was visibly trying not to answer this question. The Veritaserum won the battle, though, and the man answered the question. "The SVR."

"What is the SVR?"

“ Sluzhba Vneshney Razvedki. Russian Foreign Intelligence Service.”

“What is your mission here?”

“Watch over a house and a nightclub.”

“Why?”

“The CIA did it before us and we suspect it has a strategic impact so we do it as well.”

“What is the CIA?”

“American Central Intelligence Agency.”

“Why aren’t they watching now?”

“The agent in charge got killed, and the nightclub burned down a couple years ago.”

“How do you know about the killed agent?”

“ Our counter-intelligence services had a mole there and she reported the fact.”

“Do you know who the house belong to?”

“The CIA.”

“Do you know who lives, or lived, in it?”

“Vernon Dursley.”

Dumbledore’s eyes widened and he straightened up, listening intently.

“Anyone else?” continued Moody.

“His family.”

“Names?”

“We got only Dursley’s name before our mole was exposed.”

“Where is the man now?”

“He left for Rome.”

“Do you have a team there?”

“Yes.”

“What are their names and location?”

“Katharine Tchenko and Ivan Dosvalov. Hilton Hotel.”

“What else do you know about this?”

“Nothing.”

“Very well. Stupefy. Obliviate.”

And Moody repeated that last spell on each of the living agents in the room.

After a moment of pause, the two wizards looked at each other and nodded. They knew what had to be done. Dumbledore grasped his things, storing them back in his pockets. He then called Fawkes over before turning to Moody.

“Thank you, Alastor.” he said, and they disappeared.

Grumbling about stylish old men, the scarred wizard began to arrange the place for an appropriate set-up. He had much to do before leaving for Italy.
Hogwarts...

When Harry approached the Great Hall for lunch, he found himself grabbed by Hermione and Ron and dragged in the nearest empty classroom.

Once there, the irate Ravenclaw faced him.

“How could you, Harry? Honestly!”

“What are you talking about?” he asked in bewilderment.

“This!” she exclaimed, throwing a newspaper to him.

Harry took it, looked at her pointed look, and opened it. Today’s Daily Prophet edition had one article taking the full cover.

Interview with Harry Potter
by Jerry Homest

When this reporter read someone else’s paper ranting on the fact that the famous Boy-Who-Lived was a myth, he couldn’t do less than seek the truth. It seems that Harry Potter isn’t a myth at all. He goes to class, eats with friends everyday, and does everything a happy eleven-year-old does everyday. For security reasons, though, you will understand that his exact location will stay under wraps, as the identity of the people living around him.

Jerry Homest: So, Mister Potter, thank you for receiving me. I had a difficult time finding you, you know?

Harry Potter: I know. My guardians did everything they could in order to hide me from the fame I was sure to receive. I don’t like that fame. It’s not like I did something, actually. I was just one year old when it happened! (he laughs)

JH: I guess that you don’t want people to call you a hero, or the Boy-Who-Lived?

HP: Yes. I don't like hyphenated names. You-Know-Who and the like... It's stupid, really! Just call people by their names, please. In my case, I'd like to be called Harry, just Harry.

JH: If that's your wish, I'll call you Harry, then... Harry, even if you don't live there, do you have news about Britain?

HP: I have. Some friends let me borrow their Daily Prophet, but I can't say I'm happy with everything in it. Just to take one example, I found out I was a myth, that my father was an arrogant git and my mother an ice queen. Let's just say that I wasn't really happy with it at the time, and I wonder what other persons that particular reporter had wronged.

JH: You don't want to return there?

HP: To Britain? Not yet, no. I'm happy with my education and my friends.

JH: Don't you think you belong there?

HP: Belong there? Let me tell you my story, and you'll understand I don't belong there at all. I have lived with wizards until my parents got killed by Voldemort, and somebody put me in care of my mother's muggle relatives. Since then, and until a short time ago, I didn't know I was a wizard. I lived as a British muggle for six years, and then followed my adoptive family to America and then to China, spending a year in each place. We then went to France, where some muggles, equivalent to your Unspeakables, took hold of me and brought me to Germany. My family got separated and I spent several years tracking them, crossing several Middle East countries with the help of friends I gathered along the way. I have lived on the run for three years, and now that I'm finally settling in one place, you want me to move?

JH: Wow. It seems you led an agitated life.

HP: I sure did! (he laughs again)

JH: I'm trying to understand everything from your retelling. Why did you move away from Britain, and to these other places afterwards?

HP: My adoptive dad had a job offer in America. There, several people noticed him, and offered him to work for them in China, then in France. It was these people's life-long enemies who kidnapped me to Germany afterwards.

JH: You are happy, now?

HP: I am, thank you. I still have issues to deal with, but with the friends I have, everything is going well.

JH: What kind of issues?

HP: (he smiles) I think I'll address these in a future interview.

JH: Any idea of what you'll do after you graduate?

HP: I have always wanted to be a computer scientist (note from the editor: we don't know what that means either), but with the magical world I fell into, I don't know anymore. Besides, it's seven years from now.

JH: Thank you, Mister Potter-

HP: Harry.

JH: Very well. Thank you, Harry. We will keep in touch, then.

HP: Sure. See you later.

Harry looked up. He had barely rifled through the article, knowing full well what he had written. "What about it, Hermione?"

"I know we talked about it, but you could have told us that you were going to go online so soon."

He looked around and, not feeling anyone listening in, he started to explain. "I'm sorry, alright? Besides, it's not even the half of what I want them to print. If I wanted to say everything at once, they would have rejected the whole thing."

“Why?”

“Because they wouldn’t have believed it.”

That didn’t calm them, but he promised they would have a hand in writing the next article, so that they wouldn’t be taken off the loop.

They didn’t know that, at the very same moment, Dumbledore and his Heads of House were having another conversation revolving around the article on Harry Potter.

Dumbledore looked at McGonagall with a nonplussed expression. In the same way Harry had been abducted by his friends, the old man had been taken away by the Gryffindor Head on his way to lunch.

“Why did you drag me to my own office? And why did you take upon yourself to bring everyone as well?” he asked, noticing the arrival of the other Heads.

Wordlessly, the stern woman threw today’s edition of the Daily Prophet on his desk. ‘So many things land on my desk these days.’ he reflected, before taking the newspaper.

His eyes widened on reading the large title, and he read the article completely, his hunger forgotten.

When he raised his head, he was looking at McGonagall again. “I wasn’t aware that Mister Potter had been interviewed. And I don’t know any Jerry Homest.”

“Neither do we, Albus.” she said. “It’s a pity you weren’t in the Great Hall this morning; it was in a right state. Mister Potter’s interview was in everybody’s mind for at least a period, and I had difficulties with the fifth years myself.”

Dumbledore nodded. Pieces of the boy’s story were putting themselves together in his mind. There was one question unresolved, though.

Why Rome?

Two days later...

The black-clad man entered the Headmaster's office.

"Severus?" asked Dumbledore.

"The ointment is finished, Albus."

"Good! You have some on you?"

Snape nodded, extracting a bottle of a deep purple lotion from his pockets.

"Let's go there, then."

And the two of them left the room, heading for the infirmary.

An hour later, in the Room of Requirements...

The SAGES group was going full stride, and Harry was helping Seamus and Ernie with a little hint about ingredients and reactions.

"...and if you mix with hellebore, you'll-

He stopped his sentence abruptly, and looked at Ron and Hermione. They, too, stopped what they were doing, although less brusquely. The three of them looked at each other, and nodded before leaving the room wordlessly. The group, now devoid of its unofficial leaders, began to ponder about why they left in such a hurry. However, Nature disliking emptiness, the place of leader got taken quite rapidly, and they continued their work, the event relegated to the back of their mind for quite some time.

The Hospital Wing...

A knock was heard from the door but it opened before the three adults there could move. Still wordlessly, Harry, Ron and Hermione

placed themselves near Tracey, Ron and Hermione holding a hand and Harry putting his on Tracey's still cold forehead.

"Err... what are you doing?" asked Pomfrey.

After a few seconds, Harry answered. "Helping her." he said in a bland voice.

Snape and Dumbledore looked at each other. They had given the ointment to Pomfrey for her to apply it and had been called back in the private room mere seconds before the three students had barged in. Their suspicions, which Dumbledore had quashed after Harry's earlier questioning, returned in full force. How could those three be aware that Tracey was being healed at that precise moment? And what were they meaning by "helping her"? No one could help the poor girl yet. Unless...

He looked at the three of them curiously, but it was Harry he was more interested in. The boy was visibly very focused. There was only one reason for their sudden arrival and his concentration. He surreptitiously extracted his wand and aimed it carefully. He was ready to enter the boy's mind again when his sight got invaded by a young redhead. At the same time, the young brunette spoke up.

"Headmaster, I don't know what you intend to do, but if it's entering a student's mind, you should have the approval of that student and his parents or guardians. We aren't doing anything illegal or against the rules." Hermione said, before turning toward Snape. "Without said approval, the infringing adult risks a mark on his career, and, if the student or his parents press charges, removal from the school, and a short time in Azkaban."

The three adults gaped. Ronald Weasley had acted his true Gryffindor part, putting himself in harm's way, while Hermione had been the perfect Ravenclaw, documenting herself on rules and procedures. It also came to their attention that Hermione Granger, always abiding to rules and authority figures, had just countered her own Headmaster using these rules. Dumbledore slowly lowered his

wand, implicitly acknowledging that he had wanted to do exactly what she said, and Ron returned to the prone girl's side.

"In this case, Miss Granger, can you tell us what Mister Thomson is doing right now?" demanded Snape.

Harry was still having his hand on Tracey's forehead, and Hermione smiled. "I think he's helping her."

"But... how?" asked Pomfrey.

"I don't know." the girl answered. "When muggles fall into a coma, their relatives and friends often come to speak to them. And when they awake, most say that they heard everything, despite their lack of response. I think Harold is doing the same."

"It's working." said Ron suddenly.

Hermione and the three adults jumped at that statement. It was true, though. Tracey's eyes were fluttering. Harry still hadn't moved.

"Alright." said the Hospital Matron. "If she's awakening, I have to run checks and give her potions. Out with you!"

Ron and Hermione looked at Harry but, seeing that he was still focused, they didn't move. Pomfrey looked at Dumbledore in askance, but the man merely shrugged and she huffed before drawing her wand. To her surprise, the scanning spells revealed that everything was fine, although the girl wouldn't be able to move for a few hours and she would also be sore for a few days afterwards.

As if to confirm the diagnostics, Tracey's eyes opened and she looked around in fright. The children around the bed turned around, and Ron found himself next to Hermione while a tired Harry went to Tracey's side.

"Harold!" she exclaimed weakly, unsuccessfully trying to lift her arm.

He understood what she wanted and hugged her.

“When you disappeared, I thought you were dead!” she said, starting to sob on his shoulder. “I couldn’t reach you.”

“Shh... it’s alright, Trace.” he whispered. “I’ll explain later.”

They spent several seconds like this before separating, still holding hands.

“And when I found the book, I started to...” she started, before frowning. “Hey! I’m free? I don’t feel the-”

Harry squeezed her hand, effectively interrupting her. His eyes indicating the people around them, he mouthed ‘Later’ before saying “Yes, but I think you’re rather tired right now”

She looked thoughtful for half a second and nodded, before reclining back, closing her eyes and yawning for good measure. After a last squeeze to her hands, the three other students departed from the infirmary, quickly followed by the two teachers, leaving Madam Pomfrey to take care of Tracey.

“Mister Thomson? Mister Weasley? Miss Granger? Can you accompany me in my office, please?” asked Dumbledore.

Harry looked at him. “If you only want to ask about what I did, sir, I’d rather come alone. I’m sure Hermione and Ron have to get their stuff back from the... study group. In fact, I can answer you right here, Headmaster.”

If looks could kill, Snape would be a murderer. Well, he was already, but he would have many more souls to account for. ‘How comes the impertinent brat gets such leeway from Albus? Nobody ever questions Albus’ decisions!’

To his surprise, though, Dumbledore nodded and smiled genially. “Very well, Mister Thomson. What did you do?”

“As Hermione told you, sir, we were merely trying to comfort her during her awakening.” Harry answered candidly.

“I couldn’t miss the focused look you had on Miss Davis.”

After a second, Harry asked “Is it a question, sir?”

Placating Snape, who seemed ready to jump for the boy’s throat, Dumbledore smiled again. “Alright. Why were you so concentrated about her?”

Harry sighed. “I was trying to imagine her condition, sir. Awakening from such a state is likely to bring her quite a shock. I mean, it has been more than a month of absence, you know?”

The boy’s concern seemed genuine, and, even if Harry didn’t seem to be upset by his Headmaster’s repeated intrusions in his mind, Dumbledore couldn’t very well repeat it right in front of Hermione, especially after her earlier speech.

“Alright, Mister Thomson, I don’t have anymore questions. You are free to join your friends and your study group.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Tracey’s awakening was announced the next morning, and the girl received the visit of several friends during the next few days. It has been decided that, despite her improving state, she’d stay at the infirmary. Harry was there quite often, and they discussed over things, both verbally and silently.

During one of these discussions in her mind, Tracey asked about him. “You seem tired these times, Harry. Is it because you gave so many of your memories to me? Thank you, by the way. I’m quite sure I can catch up with the courses, now. Well, except in History of Magic. Your memories of it were quite... missing. You were sleeping, weren’t you?”

They laughed at that, but quickly returned to the first question.

“I know I’m tired.” he answered. “I should sort my mind, because when I helped you out of your coma, I took something from yours.”

“You took something from my mind?” she asked, half-upset and half-curious.

“Yes.” he admitted. “It was a dark shroud and it would have influenced you. I guess that it’s what you mentioned by saying you were free?”

“Yes. Thank you for stopping my babbling about it. I don’t want the others to know I have been controlled by a mere book.”

“I know. I’m trying to find the other girls, but they seem so elusive these days...”

“The diary has told us that it could hide us from the prying eyes.” she said thoughtfully. “I guess it was quite true, then.”

They stayed in a companionable silence for a few minutes and she spoke again.

“I think you should do it soon, Harry. I mean taking care of both the snake and your memories.” she shuddered but quickly got her control back. “I’m so glad it’s finished. You know, I was worried about your disappearance, and the diary seemed ready to listen. It seemed to understand me, and it quickly began to guide me. At some point, I wasn’t even aware of what I was doing. I was feeling my life being taken over by a mere book.” she shuddered again. “It is truly an evil thing.”

He stayed silent. That last sentence was so true that it didn’t need confirmation. “I’ll do it tonight. That way, we’ll have tomorrow to enjoy properly. Is Pomfrey freeing you then?”

“She said Sunday morning, so, unless something gets in the way, I’ll be there.” she smiled.

“Sleep well.” he said, hugging her.

“You too, after you get your mind sorted out.” she answered.

They exited from her mind, and hugged again, this time in real.

“Harry?” she asked.

“What?”

“You are cold, and sweaty. Are you alright?”

He stayed silent, and she broke the hug, looking at him with concern.

“Now that you ask,” he started in a weak voice, “I don’t feel so well.”

He sat heavily on the bed, panting, and in visible pain.

“What is it? What can I do?” she enquired worriedly.

His voice was now so weak that she had to come closer to hear it.
“Hide me.” he said, and fell backwards in convulsions.

The girl didn’t know what to do, but tried to act nonetheless. She got up and closed the curtain around the bed to discourage eventual visitors, before coming back to hold Harry so that he wouldn’t fall off the bed. He was making much noise, though, and she decided to use one of the stealthy Slytherins’ favourite spells. She picked her wand from the bedside table and pointed it at him.

“Silencio.”

As she did so, she decided to see what was happening in his mind. Despite not being as powerful as Harry, she knew how to do it with a wand.

“Legilimens.”

She found herself in his mind and recognized the usual fake normalcy of it. What was shocking, though, was the dark smoke-like tendrils escaping from rifts on the ground, and surrounding the white building.

She knew she didn't have the ability to heal him, so she extracted herself before being caught. Once outside, she hugged him, while thinking about the situation. She had recognized the malevolence from the dark strands and shuddered. If Harry was possessed by the diary because of her...

She had half the thought to call for help, but knew that Madam Pomfrey was in Dumbledore's office right now. And a look at Harry's face made her reconsider her options. The boy's face was now quickly fading into his real one, all pretences dropped, and even the famous lightning-shaped scar had reappeared. It was an angry red, too, and bleeding profusely. Except holding him tight and trying to clean the blood with a cloth, she couldn't do much.

She was quite afraid of Harry's condition, but became really terrified when he screamed. She couldn't hear it thanks to her previous Silencing charm, but she clearly saw that he was drawing his voice box raw. There were only two other people in the whole school knowing about Harry's true nature, and she closed her eyes, trying to contact them. Feeling her sapphire pendant heating up, she grasped it and suddenly realized that her call had been heard.

Two minutes later, Hermione and Ron barged in the silent infirmary. After a look at Harry, Hermione returned outside and put a low-level detection charm to warn them of who would arrive, before entering again and locking the door.

"What happened?" asked Ron.

Tracey looked at them, tears threatening to flow. "I don't know. We were talking in my mind, and where he got out, he collapsed. He only told me to hide him."

"He knew what was happening, then." Hermione inferred. "It must have happened before."

“I also went in his mind and I saw... something... which reminded me of the diary I told you about.”

“Do you think he is possessed?” asked Ron worriedly.

They all looked at their friend, nobody wanting to answer the question.

After ten more minutes, Harry seemed to calm himself sufficiently for his friends to remove the silencing spell. His eyes fluttered open and Ron and Hermione gasped.

“What?” he croaked. “I’m not dying, am I?”

“It sure looked like you were.” said Tracey, showing him the bloodied cloth.

At the same time, Hermione suddenly straightened up.

“Pomfrey is coming back.” she stated. “You’d better return to your proper self, Harry.”

“No time.” he rasped, his voice still raw. “Scar takes time to hide.”

“What do we do, then?” asked Ron, still worried.

“I have better solution.” Harry smiled weakly. “But it will surprise you. I’ll tell everything later.”

And he disappeared.

After a couple seconds of shock, Hermione heard his voice in her head. “I’m still there, but hurry up, or Pomfrey will find her own door locked.”

Hermione jerked awake, surprising the other two, and she rushed to the door, barely finishing her Finite Incantatem when the door handle turned. At the same time, Ron had received another mental message and he quickly cast the cleaning spell on the bloodied cloth and bed.

Both of them had just the time to hide their wand before the school nurse noticed Hermione presence.

“It’s nice of you to come see Miss Davis again.” she said, oblivious of whatever had happened just before. “I’ll see you later.” she finished, thinking that Hermione’s location near the door meant that she was leaving. At the same time, taking advantage of the discussion, Tracey had scrambled back into her bed and Ron was helping her smoothing the sheets.

Hermione was still undecided, but Harry’s voice came in her head again. “Don’t worry.” he said. “If anything goes wrong, I’m still able to use my mind.”

She nodded to the nurse and left, relieved about Harry’s recovery. After all, the SAGES were still at work and she had to lead them.

She heard a chuckle in her own mind and threatened. “If you don’t leave my mind, I’ll force you to tell me every little secret you have by roasting you on a bonfire.”

“Alright.” he answered humbly, and she smiled. “You can be really scary, you know?” he finished, before she felt his mental presence slip away.

“I know.” she muttered. “Trust me, I know.”

At the same time, Harry was wondering what to do. The vision he had just received had been so hurtful that he wished not to have any more, yet they were so informative that he knew he should keep having them.

For the moment, though, he had to act upon his new data.

Voldemort had been particularly happy. The Dark Lord had been planning with his followers, and they had started and finished the meeting by torturing innocent people. For the dark wizards, it was a heartening hobby, but Harry had felt every curse thrown at the poor muggles, and his vision had finished only when they had been killed.

Looking around, he noticed that Pomfrey had left and that Tracey and Ron were discussing Quidditch over a chess game.

After mentally telling them that he was leaving, he Apparated to his dorm, finding it empty, and fetched a quill and several parchments. He then sat on his bed and closed his curtains. Concentrating on his shape and face, it took him fifteen minutes to recover Harold Thomson's appearance, down to his lack of scar.

He then wrote two messages, only slightly changing the wording between them, and wrote a third one, much more detailed. Once done, he Apparated to the Owlery and sent the first message with a tawny school owl. Using Hogwarts to check about Dumbledore's whereabouts and finding that the Headmaster wasn't in his office, he Apparated there and deposited the second message on the man's desk.

He didn't know that the man had trapped his office, though, and when he tried to Apparate away, he found himself stuck in an anti-Apparation ward, finding the gaseous reality solid again. In a sudden panic, he decided to take the most obvious exit and, returning to normalcy, he left the room through the office door. He hadn't time to descend the stairs, though, as he heard the gargoyle opening. Stuck between a rock and a hard place, he decided to hide in the gaseous reality again. Even if he couldn't move, he would be invisible – and intangible.

He saw Dumbledore and Snape walk by, both panting and the former holding a little bell which he understood must have been the notifying item for the intrusion alarm. The two wizards entered the room and looked left and right, wands at the ready, but saw no one. Their shoulders slumped and they sat, slowly recovering a normal breathing. They had visibly run from wherever they had been and, despite a better health and lifespan, wizards didn't seem as physically fit as sport-addicted muggles.

“What do you think it was, Albus?” asked Snape, still looking around. Hearing no answer, he looked at the old man intently.

Dumbledore was looking at his desk, his eyes wide. "It has started again."

He showed the letter, and Snape jumped on his feet, casting several detection spells. When they were sure that it wasn't trapped, they both bent over it.

Their reading done, they looked at each other.

"It can't be." said Snape disbelievingly.

"I would think so but, given the previous note's content, I think we should trust it."

The Potion Master slumped in a nearby armchair. "It's really starting again, then, isn't it?"

"I do hope this message is false, Severus. But we can't rule out interferences from Voldemort from now on."

After another thoughtful minute of silence, Snape nodded and took his leave, closing the office door on his way.

Harry, who had witnessed everything from behind the now closed doorway, waited several minutes for the Potion Master to effectively leave the vicinity, before returning to his tangible and visible state. As inconspicuously as possible, he walked down the stairs and walked out of the gargoyle-guarded office entrance. No one was near, and he walked down a couple stairs until he was sure that the Headmaster's anti-Apparation field was behind him. He tested it, and found himself free to roam again.

His next target was in Diagon Alley, and it took him a few jumps and a couple minutes to land in the recess nearest the Daily Prophet Headquarters in the guise of Jerry Homest. It took him an hour to convince the editor-in-chief not to throw his article away immediately. He even had to promise several other interviews with Harry Potter and a more in-depth story for the next day. At that point, he didn't care about being paid; he just had to have his truth printed before any

other's. If his vision was right, the editor wouldn't care about any other article, though.

He left the building and returned to Hogwarts in time for dinner. And he had to act as surprised as everybody to find the head table almost empty.

Ministry of Magic...

Next to the Minister's office, there was a room where a dozen employees worked for the Minister, sorting his large mail, putting appropriate stamps on decisions and bills, and doing every paperwork related to the man's position. When a tawny owl appeared to the incoming mail window, Aaron Nonymous took the letter and checked for the usual spells before opening it. Reading the short message, he frowned, before grinning. It was obviously a joke, wasn't it? No, he wouldn't disturb his boss, especially when his "good friend" Lucius Malfoy was in his office with him, discussing important matters. He dropped the letter in the nearest trashcan.

It was the worst decision he could have taken.

Headmaster's office...

"Quiet! Quiet!"

Dumbledore had requested a meeting of the Order of the Phoenix and, after verifying that all of them knew about Harry Potter's last article, he had told them about Snape's adventure with Voldemort. There had been shouts and cries, but he had succeeded in calming them. However, after he had explained the message content, chaos had erupted again.

After his more mundane ways of silencing them failed, he sighed and extracted his wand.

"Silencio." he said, targeting the whole group.

It took some time for some of them to understand that they had been silenced, the one taking the longest being Mrs Weasley.

“Thank you. Now that we know about it, we should do something about it.”

They nodded, and he removed the silencing charm. They only had a few hours to prepare.

That night...

Harry, his features changed into Jerry Homest's once again, looked around, then at his watch. He knew that the whole thing would be starting soon, and hoped that his messages had been taken to heart. To back up his story, he had even reserved a room in the dingy inn at the end of Knockturn Alley. Returning to the present, he strengthened his grip on his most powerful wand, checking for the last time that Rowena Ravenclaw's ring was oriented the proper way.

‘Don't fear, Harry. What will happen, will happen.’ he heard the Founder's voice say in his mind.

“Strangely, that doesn't help me much.” he answered sarcastically, before Apparating to his chosen hiding place.

Well-hidden between Madam Malkin's shop and the bookshop, he had a great view of the Diagon Alley, and immediately noticed when several people appeared right in front of Gringotts. They all had a black and hooded robe and a white mask. One of them pointed his wand up and said something which echoed in the whole alley.

“Morsmordre.”

“Incendio.” shouted another one, putting fire to the dull shop at the corner between Knockturn and Diagon Alley.

Showtime.

Harry pressed upon whatever power he still held on Time, and the wizards in front of him seemed to suddenly crawl at a snail's pace.

“Accio wands.” Harry intoned. That useful spell had been found by Hermione a while ago, and he had shamelessly copied her memory of it before the night. He had known he would need it.

The dark wizards saw their wands ripped from their hands and the few of them who had a secondary wand got it ripped from whatever place it was hidden too, tearing through their clothes as needed. All wands flew toward the dark corner where Harry was hidden and landed in the boy’s schoolbag, held up just for this to happen. Once done, Harry Apparated out, heading for Gringotts’ roof. From there, he saw a few quick-witted Death Eaters running towards his previous hiding place while the others were still contemplating their empty hands, wondering.

He then looked at the Dark Mark floating in front of him and aimed his wand at it.

“Lumos.”

The small sun that appeared over Diagon Alley tore the mark’s magic away, woke the inhabitants, and blinded the Death Eaters temporarily. Unlike New Year’s fight, Harry hadn’t aimed at the wizards themselves so they would recover their sight in a matter of minutes.

During these minutes, however, several wizards and witches Apparated in the alley, and, after a few seconds of shock at seeing that it was still daytime there, they proceeded in stunning the defenceless dark robed wizards. Two of them concentrated on putting the fire out, casting spells Harry memorized the incantation of, for future use.

Despite finding that they were very few and without Auror uniform, Harry was relieved that at least one of his messages had been taken seriously. He smiled, and was just cancelling his light spell when he heard a pop behind him, followed by an incantation.

“Expelliarmus.”

He didn't have time to react as his wand got ripped from his hand, flying toward the other wizard. Not waiting for the item to arrive, said wizard cast two other spells at him and Harry decided that a quick exit was in order. He jumped off the roof and Apparated out.

His disappearance seemed to surprise the other wizard, but he Apparated away as well just as Harry was planning to take control of his mind. Looking down, he saw several grey shapes moving around, and recognized the one with a false leg as the wizard that had just taken his wand. He went downward and, to his dismay, found him giving the wand to another who looked like Dumbledore. It was hard to distinguish people in the gaseous reality, but the wooden leg and the long beard were dead giveaways. Besides, Harry could still sense people's mind and discover their identity that way.

Harry was happy at the bloodless and efficient fight, but a bit peeved at having lost his wand, and, since Dumbledore seemed to keep it, he knew he would have to pay the man another visit soon.

The wizards and witches who had finished stunning and binding the Death Eaters lined them against Gringotts' long frontage and disappeared, while Dumbledore summoned Fawkes to send a message to the Aurors. Said Aurors arrived ten minutes later, most of them having had trouble getting into their uniforms, visibly. Leading the group was the Head of the Law Enforcement Department, Amelia Bones. She saw only Dumbledore and Moody standing there, and went straight to them.

"Albus? Why did you... Oh!" she exclaimed, taking in the row of Death Eaters.

After a few seconds of shock, she managed to recover her voice. "What is the meaning of this, Albus?"

"This afternoon, I received this message in a very... peculiar manner." he said, giving her the appropriate letter.

She didn't look at it immediately, narrowing her eyes. "What do you mean?"

“It was deposited on my desk.”

“By who?”

“That’s the peculiar manner. No one.”

She looked at him in wonder, but he seemed to tell the truth. She shrugged and lowered her eyes to the parchment.

Death Eaters active again. Attack scheduled on Diagon Alley tonight at 2:05am. Warned DP and Minister as well. I think you’ll have a surprise.

“Whoever it is, why did you trust him?” asked Bones.

Dumbledore looked thoughtful at this question. Now wanting to jeopardize his school because of its current situation concerning the Basilisk, it took him a few seconds to come up with an acceptable answer. “Because he has helped us before, using the same anonymous message.”

Bones looked at him. The man was hiding something, she thought. They had more pressing matters, however, and she walked toward the lined unconscious, and still masked, bodies, followed by the two old men. After two more steps, she stopped and turned toward them again.

“Where are your men, Albus? There are eleven Death Eaters there. Pardon me, but I don’t suppose that anyone could have dispatched them all, even with your skill. Even if I made it to the two of you, gentlemen.”

“My men, as you put it, have left a few minutes ago. They like their privacy. However, I could have done that all by myself.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think that was part of the surprise the message spoke about. When we arrived, we were greeted by a strange scene. Those eleven were walking in the sunlight, seeming blind, and none of them had a wand. A mere student could have taken them all, Amelia.”

“In the sunlight? It’s 2:20am, for Merlin’s sake!”

“I know, I know. However, you can check with our memories, or even theirs, there was a huge light on top of Gringotts. It’s gone, now, though. Alastor Apparated on the roof and managed a quick fight with the person standing there. Alastor?”

“Yes. I succeeded in taking him by surprise. He mustn’t have known of my motto. Constant Vigilance!” he exclaimed, and the two others needed all their self-control not to roll their eyes. “I caught a glimpse of his face. It’s an old man with white hair and a moustache.”

“Did you speak with him?” asked Bones while Dumbledore looked thoughtful.

“I didn’t have time. He disappeared just after I cast Expelliarmus on him.”

“Disappeared?”

“He jumped off the roof, but it doesn’t seem he landed.”

“Is it possible that he’d be still around?”

“I don’t know.” answered the grizzled Auror, before looking around suspiciously. “I’ll be double careful, then. Constant Vigilance!” he repeated, before hobbling away.

Harry, still witnessing the exchange, smiled at the Auror’s antics. He was still watching Dumbledore carefully, though, wary about his wand.

After several seconds of silence, Bones addressed Dumbledore again. "Do you think that man, whoever he is, had been able to disable them for you?"

"Why?"

"Because he asked that you come at 2:05am. Isn't it a weird time for an appointment? I mean, if he knew they were arriving at 2am, giving you that time would have implied a bloodied battle, comparing to the neat state the street is currently in."

"Hmmm... probably."

She looked at the prone bodies. Their discussion had brought them right next to them.

"You didn't remove their masks?" she asked.

"I thought you preferred unmasking villains yourself, rather than letting a "rogue group of vigilantes" doing it."

She chuckled. "Fudge's words, Albus. Not mine."

He grinned, and made a gesture of his arm, in the way of saying "After you."

She called two Aurors as witnesses and proceeded in removing the masks. The first four were quite young, and it appalled them that they would give away their free will and eventually life in an outlawed society such as the Death Eaters. The news of Voldemort's reappearance still hadn't left Hogwarts, and Bones couldn't imagine that the Death Eaters had found their Lord again.

The fifth face, though, brought a sharp intake of breath from the four onlookers. It took them several seconds to go over the fact that Lucius Malfoy was, once again, a member of such crowd.

"He won't pass through it, now." said Dumbledore grimly.

Bones' eyes acquired a hard glint. "Not if I have my way, Albus. Count on it."

"What will Cornelius say?"

She looked at him. "I'd prefer him ignorant of all this until Malfoy is out of service."

"He will want a trial."

"Fine! Let the man babble his Death Eater life under Veritaserum, then!"

They unmasked the remaining unconscious wizards but didn't find more surprises.

After thanking Dumbledore for the warning, Bones removed one of her group transportation portkeys from her robes, and, with the help of the five Aurors, took the eleven Death Eaters to the Ministry.

"An honest woman." said Moody.

"I concur." answered Dumbledore. "Judging by what we saw today, it's a quality hard to come by."

They nodded to each other and left, not knowing that a young student was following them through the gaseous reality.

If Harry had followed the Aurors instead, he would have been able to prepare for what would befall him soon, though.
Hogwarts...

Dumbledore was alone in his office. Each Order of the Phoenix member who had been there tonight had Apparated home after the skirmish. The concept of "mission debriefing" wasn't known in the wizarding world, and that had been one of the downfalls of many battles between light and dark wizards for millennia.

He was concentrating on the wand Alastor had found, but nothing came out of it. There was a spell able to give the last five spells cast by a wand, but it had only listed four. One Summoning spell, two Light charms, and one Finite Incantatem. Was it possible? Was it all that had been done to the eleven dark wizards?

He yawned. Only time would tell, he thought, and headed toward his private quarters. Mere seconds after he left, Harry shimmered in the office and exchanged the wand for a message he had written while in the gaseous reality. He knew that Dumbledore had locked his door and half-expected the alarms to ring again when he would disappear, but nothing happened and he headed for his dorm. On his way, though, a sharp and continuous pain pierced his head and he screamed.

A bit earlier, not that far from there...

“I bring a message for our Lord.” the man said, visibly trembling.

“What is it about?” asked Walden Macnair, the responsible for spies in the Ministry since Augustus Rookwood’s imprisonment.

“The Ministry captured eleven Death Eaters in a failed attack in Diagon Alley.”

Macnair was aghast. Failed attack? That meant that...

“And Lucius Malfoy was with them.” finished the spy.

That sealed it. Macnair wasn’t suicidal, after all. “Go on, then.” he said, indicating the door behind him. The man nodded, white as a sheet.

Fifteen minutes of screaming later, Macnair heard his name and hurried in the room. The Dark Lord was looking through the window, his wand held in hand so forcefully that his knuckles were white. Not wanting to try his luck, Macnair approached him and, kneeling in front of him, kissed the hem of his robes. The smell finally reached him and he noticed the spy’s charred remains next to him. He had enough

self-control not to retch on the spot, but averted his eyes quickly nonetheless.

“I have work for you.” said Voldemort in a bland tone which was, in a way, more terrifying than the man’s usual shouts of anger. “I want to know who told Dumbledore about our raid, and how my faithful Death Eaters were captured and subdued without even a fight. Now.”

Macnair dared a furtive glance up, and stopped moving, startled. Voldemort was looking right at him, and his eyes weren’t crimson like they usually were. They were now blazing with barely restrained anger. Unbeknownst to a dismissed Macnair, Voldemort had really wanted to curse him like the poor spy, and that still wouldn’t have been enough for the Dark Lord to be able to vent his anger completely. Voldemort knew that he couldn’t appease himself like that anymore, or he’d kill his followers faster than he was gaining them. And faster than the Ministry was taking them. The mere thought brought an inarticulate scream of rage and he cursed the already dead body next to him until there was nothing but blood and disrupted body cells coating the floor.

The next day, Dumbledore woke up later than usual and found his office swamped with mail owls before he could even take his breakfast. Sighing resolutely, he sat at his desk and began sifting through today’s mail when he noticed that a message had appeared on his desk. Again.

He snatched it and read it. As always, it was short and to the point.

Thank you for my wand. I think you’ll like today’s newspapers.

Dumbledore looked around, and effectively, the unknown man’s wand was shining by its absence. He sighed, and picked up the Daily Prophet. And dropped it in shock. Picking it up again, he smoothed it and read the cover main article. It wasn’t much, but the moving pictures beside it gave more depth to it.

Attack by dark wizards thwarted!
by Jerry Homest

Yesterday night at 2am, eleven wizards dressed as the infamous Death Eaters of before Apparated in Diagon Alley, right in front of Gringotts. They started by casting the also infamous Dark Mark in the Alley's night sky before putting fire to buildings. This reporter got woken by cries and shouts as unidentified wizards Apparated in and valiantly fought the assailants, using an improved version of a light spell which illuminated the whole scene for a short time, disrupting the Dark Mark at the same moment. It was over quickly, then, as the black-robed wizards were aptly blinded and fell like one. When their white mask got removed, what wasn't the defenders' surprise to find Lucius Malfoy among the Death Eaters! Will he once again insist on being under the Imperius curse? That's an old excuse! Is the man falling back to his previous antics, when he was openly consorting with a Dark Lord we are all afraid to name?

Why are we afraid to name him, by the way? This reporter remembers interviewing young Harry Potter and the boy wasn't afraid of saying it. If a mere 11 year old is able to do that, why can't we? It's not that he could reach to us, right? He is dead, after all... Unless last night wasn't an isolated move. This reporter, always questing for the Naked Truth, will keep you informed.

Dumbledore put the paper back on his desk. If his memory served him right, the Daily Prophet printed his news in the morning but the articles had to arrive the day before. Which meant...

He shuddered at the implication. It clearly meant that the reporter knew about the attack and wrote the article before it, knowing how it would happen. He knew about the light, and he knew that people would appear. He also knew about Malfoy's presence there! Only a Death Eater could know that beforehand! And he had also warned him, dropping a message on his desk.

Dumbledore praised himself on his ability to look at a situation through every angle, and he knew that it could have been several persons. The reporter, the Death Eater informant, the lone fighter on the roof, the message-dropper. However, his gut feelings were telling him that it was only one man. Besides, he had written "Thanks for my wand." so the message-dropper and the fighter must be the same

person, at least. And today's message seriously hinted that he was the reporter as well.

The question was: was he a Death Eater too? He sighed. Breakfast could wait. He had to gather the Order again. Too many variables were out of his control and it was starting to tire him again. And Harry Potter's trail was still giving nothing...

He jumped up, realizing for the first time that the author of today's shocking article was the one to have published Harry's interview too. He needed to find more about the man, and decided that he'd have a long talk with the Daily Prophet's manager, soon.

Voldemort's anger had been so sudden and intense that Harry stayed unconscious in the gaseous reality for a long time, recovering. When he woke up, it was night time again, and it was a thoroughly disoriented Harry who trudged back to his dormitory. He Apparated in the kitchens again but no one was there. It was an eerie sight, as the room was as large as the Great Hall, although not as high, with tables set up like the Great Hall's were. Famished, he lunged on a nearby roasted chicken which had visibly been left out of today's dinner.

When was "today", by the way? He felt himself tired like rarely before. His hands were bloodied again and his head was pounding. When he was sated, he left the kitchen, noticing his bloodied face and dishevelled state in the mirror near the door. He knew that he had to do something about it, but he was so tired that he wanted to go to his bed first, which he did. He closed his drapes and began to concentrate on his face again.

He didn't go far, though, as exhaustion took him, and he fell back into sleep.

The next day was Monday and first-year Hufflepuff had a free period for them to enjoy. When Justin and Ernie found that Harry's drapes were still closed at 10, they looked at each other, shrugged, and opened them, one on each side. They intended to prank him, by shouting insanely in his ears to wake him, but that idea got shot to hell when they grasped the scene in front of them. As school policy would have it, they ran to their Head of House, who was just at the

end of her first period and who agreed to escort them back to Harry's bedside.

"By my honking daffodils!" the woman swore, before approaching her hand slowly. When she arrived halfway, the boy in front of her woke up suddenly and grasped it, looking at it, and her, as if she was dangerous. Understanding dawned on his face, and his dismay was almost palpable.

Harry knew he had to do something quickly or his whole cover would be blown.

"I know I look horrible," he started, "but if you let me have a quick shower, I'll explain everything. All I ask is that you keep it a secret."

The three of them nodded absently and he jumped off the bed, wobbling toward the nearby bathroom, and internally cursing whatever god had made him sleep in the middle of a transformation. In the throes of being woken up suddenly, he had completely forgotten that some teachers' mind weren't as protected as Snape's and that he could have gotten out with a mere memory adjustment to the three onlookers.

In the safety of the bathroom, he used his control over time to get an accelerated shower, and to morph himself back into Harold Thomson, building another hopefully convincing lie on the way.

When he exited the bathroom, the two students and one professor looked at him, but they couldn't detect any trace of the blood and deformed body parts they had witnessed earlier.

"Can I ask for true Hufflepuff's loyalty on this?" he asked, referring to an oath which was sacred for every member of the House. Sensing that it was important to him, they nodded and he sat down, looking at his watch.

"Since we have Charms in ten minutes, I'll be quick. I'm a Metamorphmagus." he said, and waited a few seconds for them to absorb that bit of knowledge. "I have discovered this during

Christmas break, and I'm trying to master it. I usually try to find a hidden place to exercise it, as I don't want people to barge in when I look like a monster." he smiled. They had done just that earlier, and they smiled too. "Yesterday, though, I over-exerted myself while trying to control my growth and fell down. My face must have hit a table or something, because when I woke up, I had blood on it. I remember waking in the middle of the night and wobbling through the corridors until I fell down on my bed." He looked down. "I'm sorry to have frightened you."

Several seconds passed by and Sprout was the first to react. "Well, thank you for that bit of information. Do you want a tutor for your ability? I know just the one. A Hufflepuff alumni, too. I think she'll agree to train you."

He thought about it and decided to at least give it a chance, and nodded vigorously. "I don't want yesterday's event to happen again, that's for sure. How about during summer, though?"

Sprout nodded and stood, effectively ending the little reunion. "Now, my dear boys, I like your conversation and all, but I think you have a Charms teacher who will deduct points from my House if you arrive late to his class. You don't want that." she finished, speaking to the running boys' backs.

Chuckling, she left for her own mid-morning period.

Harry spent the morning Charm period in a daze. Voldemort was constantly angry, and it tired Harry to constantly readjust his physical attributes. He skipped lunch and went to his dorm instead. Going to his mind, he built a temporary wall around the reinforced dark shroud, thus protecting him against Voldemort's visions. It worked just fine for the afternoon Charm period, but the protection was so low that he had to skip the SAGES session afterwards.

Pretending a severe headache, he escaped to his dorm again. Ron and Hermione nodded, and were surprised to see Justin and Ernie nodding as well. Harry took just a second to mentally inform Ron and Hermione that Justin and Ernie were not in the secret of his real identity, before he took off.

Once in his bed, the drapes closed again, he went to the gaseous reality. No need to be interrupted for whatever task he needed to do now.

He returned to his mind and considered his possibilities.

He could completely rebuild his protections around Voldemort's core. It would cut the visions off, though. It was the best solution among the worst ones.

He could build protections around his white building, but he didn't want Voldemort's influence in the rest of his mind either.

He could redirect the dark tendrils Tracey had spoken about to a fake consciousness building. He smiled. It would provide another protection against mind attacks, as the fake consciousness building would just receive the attack and not propagate it to the rest of his mind. It could just store it for future reference.

Harry was slowly building his plan and, once done, he decided that it was perfect.

It took him a long time to dig around the turret he had buried so long ago. It was cracked, too, a result of his mental run-in with the Dark Lord, so he had to reinforce the cracks along the way. Once the turret was unearthed, levitated, and strengthened, it resembled a ball of stone more than a turret. He kept it that way for the moment, enjoying the fact that Voldemort wasn't troubling him anymore.

In his fake mind, he created another white building, furnishing it with fake controls and decorum to make invaders think they were in the actual thing, and he repainted his own "white building" as an innocent memory, which he surrounded by defending dragons morphed in other innocent-looking memories.

The last step was the trickiest. He built an outlet for Voldemort's influence, and arranged it so that he wouldn't feel pain from it anymore. He would receive a warning jolt, able to wake him but otherwise almost unnoticeable in his everyday life, and the outlet

would store the vision. He could decide to visualize it in real-time or at a later moment. Following the case, either way could be useful at one time or another.

In order to be able to access the vision outlet easily, he created a stone floor on top of the stone turret-turned-ball and, after lowering the whole thing back in the earth, he put the dug earth back on it.

He just had to wait for it to activate, now, and hoped he hadn't done anything wrong.

He exited his mind and, looking at his watch, found out that it was late in the evening already. After a quick trip in the kitchen to get another bite to eat, he returned to bed and slept like a log. He arrived a minute late in Herbology the next morning, but Sprout didn't remove points, looking at him in concern. After all, Snape didn't take points from Slytherin students arriving a bit late in his class, so why would she? He nodded, thankful for the attention, and concentrated on the care to use when harvesting bubotuber pus.

After all, if he was tired, he could sleep during the following period. He knew that Binns wouldn't pose any problem with that.
McLean, Virginia...

Agent Carla Mohavez looked at the paper in bewilderment. It was addressed to her and, once decrypted, told her that her agent in Geneva had just seen a house painted with flowers.

Why would an agent report such an occurrence? And since when did she have an agent there, to begin with?

To be continued in next chapter: Moving In, Moving Out...

This time it's a battle which
Is causing this to stop now.
Do you like the story's pitch?
Share your thoughts, please, let me know.

Chapter 15 – Moving In, Moving Out

posted September 24th, 2005

During the next few days, Harry kept an even lower profile than usual. He especially didn't want to bring anymore suspicion on himself from his Headmaster and Head of House. Thankfully for him and the whole school, the Basilisk seemed to do exactly the same thing.

The study group led by Hermione began to work harder as the Ravenclaw workaholic started preparing herself, and by extension the whole group, for the exams. Saturdays and even Sundays were beginning to see more and more students in the Library, pouring over large tomes. Most of them were fifth and seventh year students who had to prepare for their OWL and NEWT exams, respectively, but the SAGES had always a few members there as well. Despite the fact that the Slytherins were still reluctant about joining their study sessions, Tracey had her most friendly housemates realize that sharing their work with people from other Houses could be interesting. After all, one couldn't be labelled as cunning and ambitious and pass such an opportunity.

It was on a studious Sunday afternoon that Harry felt his blood freeze. The rumbling voice was booming through the castle again.

“I smell blood!”

He jumped on his feet, toppling his half-finished Potion essay in the process. His friends caught a glance at his pale face and shot each other a questioning glance.

“Hermione.” he whispered, and the girl approached him, sensing something was amiss. “Lock the Library door after me. Only open it when I tell you to.”

She opened her mouth to ask about it, but he was already gone. She followed him and did as he asked, locking the door magically. Taking a chair, she then sat next to the door, waiting for Harry's all-clear signal to open it again. After a few seconds, Ron brought his own chair and a few books to keep her company.

Five minutes later, the two of them were trying to dissuade several older students to leave the room when the ugly sound of scales slithering on stone was heard outside of the door. Needless to say, it quenched the older students' need to get out, while unnerving them at the same time.

Only fifteen minutes afterwards came Harry's mental notification and she opened the door. She then left the room, wand at the ready, and several students followed her, wands out, wary of what they would discover.

Their findings would strike fear in their hearts.
A bit earlier...

Harry left the Library in a hurry, immediately Apparating out and slowing time around him. His first action was to get the locking spell from Hermione's memory. He then hurled himself through the castle toward the Entrance Hall, extracting Merlin's wand from his locket on the way.

After locking the outside door with the newly-acquired locking spell, he focused on the people inside, getting from Cassie the location of students out of their dorms. For each person or group in a separate room, he closed and locked the door. He even repeated the action on the Great Hall. The few who were in the corridors were led or pushed through nearby classroom doors and locked in. And those who resisted were stunned and obliviated beforehand, or plainly taken control of.

Some students began to wonder about finding doors magically locked, and the older students, normally able to dispel charms, began to panic when their Finite Incantatem or Alohomoras weren't working. Their panic increased tenfold when they heard the sound of the creature roaming the corridors behind their closed doors, although a small number among them suddenly understood why the doors had closed and thought that the action came from the teachers or the Headmaster himself.

There was no door on the Trophy room, though, and the two persons in it were frozen on the spot when they caught the reflection of the large creature's eyes in the Slytherin trophies they were working on. Kenneth Towler was a third year Gryffindor, held in detention by Filch after a late arrival in Potions. Both he and the caretaker suddenly changed to stone, like Tracey before them.

These two were the only ones directly affected by the beast. As their luck would have it, the creature wasn't able to eat stone, and it left them there, hunting for more. Thankfully, Harry had finished isolating it from the students and, screaming in anger, it returned to its subterranean lair.

Towler and Filch weren't the only ones changed by the creature, though. The Weasley twins, through the use of an ingenious invention of theirs, spied through the locked portrait of the Fat Lady. When they saw the murderous gaze tuning their way, they turned to stone as well. They would be thankful to have designed their spying tool with many mirrors, or the deadly gaze would have simply killed them.

Harry, after having checked with Cassie about the casualties, decided to have a go at the creature himself. However, by the time he entered the Chamber of Secrets through Myrtle's bathroom, there was nobody waiting for him.

That wasn't quite true, actually.

Visibly, Daphne Greengrass had seen the Basilisk's gaze reflected on something, as a statue of her was lying in the way. The monster seemed not to have taken good care of her, as her left arm and foot had been broken.

Harry shrunk the statue and took the arm and foot as well, and Apparated near the places where the people turned to stone were. He shrunk and pocketed Towler and Filch, ignoring Mrs. Norris pitiful mewling, and headed for Gryffindor's common room entrance, changing into Jerry Homest on the way – transforming in a known shape was always easier and swifter. Unlocking the Fat Lady, he asked for entrance but didn't have to wait for an answer as somebody shot out of it.

It was Ron.

“We have to take them to the infirmary!” he yelled to several students behind him, and, as he wasn’t looking in front of him, he tumbled into Harry, who grabbed the railing to prevent a fall. Ron wasn’t that lucky, though, and slammed on the stone floor. He looked up, quite furious, holding his bleeding nose.

“I think you should go there too, sonny.” said Harry. He didn’t wait for the redhead reaction and headed there himself. Once in Madam Pomfrey’s realm, he located five empty beds side by side and enlarged the three statues while the Gryffindors deposited the twins there.

“Who knows where the Headmaster’s office is?” he asked, mustering all his authority. Pointing to Angelina, one of those timidly raising their hand, he told her to fetch Dumbledore and Pomfrey who were both there – he knew that thanks to Cassie.

“Now, who knows Snape’s quarters location?” he asked again. As there were mainly Gryffindors, fewer hands rose, and he selected Lee to fetch the Potion Master as well, telling him to ask the man to bring enough of his special ointment to cure five persons turned to stone.

He then looked at the four others, a plan forming in his mind.

“Now, you can stay there, but if you don’t mind, I have to go.” he said, before leaving the room. Mere seconds afterwards, he returned in the room in the gaseous reality. He then processed in updating the students’ memory a bit.

Hermione and several other students arrived afterwards, and gasped at the sight. The memory-modified students began to spread the false rumour and Harry smiled. He made sure to go to Lee before he arrived, changing his memory as well, and repeated the process with Angelina.

The fetched adults arrived a couple minutes afterwards, and, after making some place around the beds, Snape and Pomfrey closed the privacy curtains and began to work, while Dumbledore interrogated the students. It galled him that the infamous beast could roam the castle freely, but it seemed that the worst had been prevented. What made his head spin, though, was the students' tale. They all told him that the three Gryffindor students were in a detention with Snape tonight, which he knew was false, and that a cauldron had exploded. As Harry hadn't taken the time to completely update Ron's memory, the redhead boy also told his Headmaster about the tall and white-haired man wearing a proud moustache.

Was it the same man than in Diagon Alley? If that was the case, and if he liked to report everything he was seeing in the Daily Prophet, it would cause the school to close. Nodding to indicate his thanks for the reports, he returned to his office. He had to visit the Daily Prophet, and he had to do it now.

After preparing himself, he used his Floo access and went to the newspaper's Headquarters. Once there, he made a good use of every lever he could think of to extract information about the man from the manager, but it was fruitless. Either the unknown man didn't actually give anything to the press, or he made it so hidden that, short of a criminal investigation, nothing would be unearthed. Dumbledore left the building an hour after entering it, as worried as when he came in.

Rick Richman, the manager and editor-in-chief, looked at the black beetle on his desk.

"What do you think?"

Said beetle quickly transformed into a full-fledged witch dressed in a complete lack of respect for fashion. She smiled sweetly. "I don't know, but I think the old man has a new skeleton in his cupboard."

"I'm sorry for your earlier treatment, Rita. If you find something in the hour, you'll have the front page."

Her eyes lit up. "At the usual rate?"

"Ninety percent. With that other reporter on the market, I can't give you everything anymore."

She pouted, but agreed nonetheless. After they shook hands, she Apparated to Hogsmeade and sought an isolated corner to transform into a beetle again. Being a small Animagus had its perks, she thought, not for the first time.

Hogwarts Hospital Wing, a bit earlier...

Using the gaseous reality, Harry arrived in the busy infirmary. Even in grey, he could see Ron holding a handkerchief to his nose, while Pomfrey and Snape were bustling around the five immobile bodies. The school nurse was taking care of Greengrass and the Weasleys while Snape was pasting the salve on Filch and Towler.

"I hope there won't be more of them." the Potion Master muttered. "This stuff isn't that easy to make and I don't have much more."

Whatever Pomfrey answered was indistinct and nobody asked for a clearer version.

Most of the students had returned to their dorms, but Lee and Hermione had stayed with Ron. In hushed tones, they were exchanging their thoughts on the events of the day, but most of these consisted in anxious questions. At the same time, Ron and Hermione were wondering why Harry hadn't reappeared yet.

Tuning everyone out, Harry focused on Daphne. From past experience with Tracey, he knew that the mind would be the first to awaken from the salve and he entered hers quite easily. He was lucky that she was just awakening, though, as most of it was filled with a dark shroud he was starting to become acquainted – and annoyed – with.

He quickly extracted himself and focused on his own mind. He knew he only had a few minutes before Daphne's mind would really wake up, and made good use of these to build another subterranean ball of

strengthened stone to host the dark part of her mind. He didn't want to associate any additional influence from Voldemort to whatever hold the Dark Lord already had in his mind.

Once done, he concentrated on Daphne's prone body again, extracting all the immobile darkness from the girl's mind and storing it in the reinforced reserve he had just built in his own.

He also had to make sure that the girl's friends wouldn't use her again, and went to her consciousness building. Daphne's consciousness was still sleeping and, looking at her prone form, he considered his options. He knew that, if the girl stayed unconscious while the other persons turned to stone awoke, someone would try to see in her mind what the problem was. There was a large chance that it would be Snape and Harry decided to do something in that regard. He summoned some rope and a gag and bound her before depositing her in the same position he had found Snape, a long time ago.

It would certainly remind the Potion Master of his time under a certain Dark Lord's possession, and, by the time the man would cure her, Harry hoped he would have taken care of the whole Basilisk issue.

After taking care of the girl, he left the room. He had a message to drop.

The Headmaster's office...

The beetle passed through the half-open window and landed on a high shelf. Dumbledore was sitting at his desk, frowning at a message before turning to his phoenix, asking him something.

From where it was, the insect couldn't hear much, but, apparently, it didn't matter since the aged man grasped Fawkes' tail and both disappeared in a flash of fire.

Taking advantage of the office's emptiness, the beetle flew down to the Headmaster's desk. The insect's shape wasn't an appropriate one to read, though. Imagine having to read sentences made of 4-yard long letters on the ground. Once it landed near the desk, it

transformed into Rita Skeeter's usual shape. The message, though, didn't help her much.

No Roman. Rangers have friend. Coming?

She looked through the old man's papers but didn't actually move them in fear that he would know about it. She suspected that the powerful man would throw a fit if he knew she had been there. However, her search didn't yield anything and she transformed back into a beetle before taking off. From her nosy reporter's point of view, there were always interesting places to visit and things to see in a wizarding school.

She wasn't aware that she was being watched, though.

Hiding in the gaseous reality, Harry was thoughtful. He had been in the Headmaster's office and had intended to wait several seconds to see if the Headmaster wasn't returning immediately before dropping his message. He had been shocked to see someone else appearing, and had used his mental powers to check the woman's identity and purpose.

Apparently, Rita Skeeter was on a mission to dig even more dirt about Dumbledore. Harry wasn't a friend of his Headmaster, especially as he suspected that the old man was still on Harry Potter's trail, but he couldn't leave him be slandered in the same way again. And if the woman found about the Basilisk...

He shuddered. It would cause chaos on such a scale that it wouldn't be manageable. The school would be closed, and it would play right in some people's hands. People like Voldemort.

During his brief browsing of Skeeter's mind, he had discovered that she had almost no protection and decided to do something about her. Just as the large insect was going to pass the window, a mental blast made it pause and it fell back on the ledge. Thankfully, despite the height it had fallen from, its hardened outer shell had prevented any physical damage. Harry left the gaseous reality, still in Jerry's shape, and dropped another message of his on the cluttered desk, before

taking the prone insect in one of his pockets. He would have to find a bottle to imprison her, he thought. Or something even sturdier.

After leaving the tangible reality, he went to Diagon Alley. Sitting at Florean Fortescue's, he savoured a vanilla-flavoured cup topped with cherries and cream, while writing another quick article for the Daily Prophet. He had to give his explanation first, even if it would appear in the inner pages of the newspaper. In that domain, the first one was often the right one in the public eye.

If several persons noticed the old man sitting in the Ice Cream Parlour among the younger crowd, nobody said anything. To him, at least.

Two tables from him sat a shabby man and a young girl looking like his daughter. They were stealing glances at the seemingly older man and talking to themselves in low tones. However, it wasn't the father-daughter kind of discussion.

"You know what Mad-Eye said about him, Remus." she was whispering.

"I know, Tonks, but don't you thing Moody's quite old? He could have-

"He's perhaps old and everything, but he can still beat both of us in a heartbeat!"

"Shh! You are going to get us discovered." he said, looking up. "He seems to have finished writing, and his ice cream bowl is still half full. Go see if you can steal a glance at his message."

She nodded, and stood up. Going to the counter with the excuse of getting another ice cream cone, she succeeded in catching the title: Potion incidents at Hogwarts.

Not long afterwards, the man left the parlour and went to the Daily Prophet Headquarter. He didn't stay for more than a few minutes, and crossed a girl holding hands with her dad on his way out. 'Charming',

he thought, before going to the apothecary, where he bought several bottles imbued with the Unbreakable Charm. He pocketed them all except one and put the beetle in there just before heading out. However, as he wasn't sure about the Animagus abilities, he didn't unfreeze it yet. It was more as a security for her, until he would store it in his trunk.

He smiled. If he continued that way, his trunk would become the magical equivalent of Noah's Ark. That made him think of Hagrid's egg and he frowned. What in the hell was it? Since he got it, he had added wood to the fire to keep the thing hot, but it hadn't cracked yet, and he was starting to wonder. He seriously hoped that Norbert wasn't just an overgrown ostrich egg which was going to be overcooked by now.

Shaking his head to clear his mind from these stray thoughts, he left the little shop and returned to Diagon Alley.

After his numerous trips there, Harry had noticed that there was a place where people went to Apparate in or out of the shopping alley, and he was heading there when he noticed the same father-daughter couple sitting on a bench nearby. He frowned internally. He had seen there outside of the Daily Prophet's building, and, thinking about it, he remembered seeing them at Florean's as well.

Taking a quick decision, he went there and sat next to them.

"Nice evening, isn't it?" he asked, looking at the darkening sky.

"Hmm... yes, sir." the man answered.

"I enjoy the calmness, it's like... like before a battle."

They both looked at him with wide eyes and he smiled back. He took advantage of the few seconds of shocked silence to browse their peripheral thoughts. It brought quite a shock, but he didn't stop smiling. He had to play his act properly.

“You have a good daughter, sir. I remember mine... I had three...” he said, stopping suddenly. He needed the pauses to go through their mind.

“Three daughters, Mister?” asked the girl after a moment.

Harry by now had everything he needed, and he nodded gravely. “The war against Voldemort took them.” he invented, ignoring their gasp as he had said the Dark Lord’s name on purpose. “They jumped in a fight that wasn’t theirs, you know?”

He then looked at the sky. The night hadn’t fallen yet, but the crescent moon was already visible. The false dad looked up as well and shuddered. Looking back at the seemingly older man, Remus saw him looking at him gravely. “You know?” the man repeated, before standing up, smiling, all seriousness vanished.

“It was nice talking to you.” he said, before turning toward the Apparation point.

“Wait!” exclaimed the girl he knew was a Metamorphmagus named Nymphadora Tonks. When he looked at her, an eyebrow raised, she blushed and stuttered. “You... We... What’s your name?”

“That’s a nice girl.” Harry said to the man he knew was a Werewolf named Remus Lupin. “As she isn’t allowed to speak to strangers, she asks my name so that I won’t be a stranger anymore. I’m Jerry Homest.” he finished, looking at the girl as he was answering her question. “My name doesn’t have any meaning, girl, but if you had asked your grandfather, he would certainly have told it to you.”

“My... grandfather, sir?”

“Since you play Remus’ daughter, I can only imagine Dumbledore as your grandfather, Nymphadora.” He said, cocking his head to the side. He winked at their shocked faces, and disappeared.

Tonks and Lupin looked at the place the man had disappeared from in shock. She was the first to react.

“Damn!” she exclaimed, not a proper word in her actual shape, but she was too incensed to care. “He bloody called me Nymphadora!”

It took a large part of Remus’ self-control not to burst into laughter at her remark.

Rome...

Other place, same methods.

Once again, Moody was waiting for Dumbledore, his enemies lined against the wall. They were fewer, but one of them was a witch, judging by the wand he had taken from her.

When Dumbledore arrived, the grizzled Auror immediately launched into a retelling of his most recent actions while the older man removed his interrogation tools from his pockets, like last time: a stack of parchments and a Quick-Quote quill.

“...and when my disillusionment spell got cancelled, I noticed that they had a witch with them. I then reverted to my wizarding duelling tactics and quickly dispatched her. The two muggles were already down.”

“Good.” said Dumbledore, nodding to emphasize his approval. Even if most knew that the old Auror was a powerful fighter, he still had to be praised for it, or his will to fight would lower. That was one bit of battle psychology that Dumbledore had learned the hard way during the numerous skirmishes studding his long life.

Dumbledore extracted the vial of Veritaserum and gave it to Moody, who proceeded to use it on the witch. It was quite an illegal thing to do but the two of them had done worse before.

The woman, named Sarah Connor, was an American witch who had been planted by the American Ministry in a muggle secret agency. Exactly eighteen months earlier, she had been given the task of waiting in the Hilton lobby for a man named Vernon Dursley. Judging by her answers to the Veritaserum, her memory was unclear from

that point. It seemed that she had had the sudden compulsion to strip when two men entered the lobby.

By repeating the same question again and again, Moody and Dumbledore forced her to re-examine her memories and they succeeded in extracting the name of one of the men. It really was Vernon Dursley. The man was limping, and the one accompanying him had his left sleeve folded, indicating a missing arm. The two men had immediately been dragged out by an unidentifiable child and that was all she could tell.

The two other agents had nothing more to tell except that Sarah joined them willingly after having been kicked out of the CIA for her stunt.

Moody Obliviated the three of them and the two wizards grabbed the Fawkes Express to return to Hogwarts. Once there, Dumbledore got the mitigated pleasure of finding another note on his desk.

Things to do for the Headmaster:

- charm all Hogwarts doors so that they would lock as soon as the Basilisk is out. It would prevent me from running up and down the castle to do it manually.
- lower the barriers between Houses. With Lucius out of the picture, the Board should be more amenable.
- hire a spin doctor. It could ease my task with the newspapers.

Dumbledore and Moody looked up from the note. Both had the same question on their mind: What was a spin doctor?

The information about Vernon's one-armed friend got to the background for the moment, and the Headmaster would later kick himself for forgetting it.

Hogwarts Great Hall, the next morning...

After having checked on Hagrid once more – the large man was quite happy to have someone to tell Centaur stories to – Harry had had a good night of sleep, and entered the room with a smile on his face, nodding to his friends on the way.

“How can you be so happy?” asked Susan when he took his customary place next to her. “The school is upside down because of yesterday’s events, and you smile?”

“I remember the sounds in the corridors.” he replied, knowing she did too. “Whatever caused it was big, and I’m happy no one died.” he answered truthfully, before turning to his morning meal.

“You’re right.” she answered after a moment.

“You know what?” he asked suddenly, his loaded fork halfway to his mouth and a smirk on his face. “I’m not that glad, in fact. Filch didn’t die.”

Susan laughed, and the two of them continued their discussion for a short while, until the mail arrived. Harry waited for Justin to sift through the Daily Prophet like he used to, and he wasn’t disappointed.

“That’s weird!” Justin said.

“What?” asked Ernie Macmillan, who was sitting in front of him.

“Listen:

Potion incidents at Hogwarts by Jerry Homest

We all love to tell stories about our education, and the Daily Prophet strives to report factual occurrences to you, faithful reader. In that spirit, this reporter went to Hogwarts for a short meeting with the school’s Headmaster Albus Dumbledore. The man reported nothing of importance with the notable exception of a Potion incident which left four students and the caretaker Argus Filch in the infirmary for a couple of hours. For those who know Filch, know that his cat Mrs Norris had taken his job of patrolling the corridors in the meantime. Mrs Norris doesn’t have the power to deduct points, though.

Some also say that Hogwarts is enchanted and dangerous, but this reporter also took time to patrol the corridors of the aged castle and noticed nothing out of the ordinary. Sure, there are moving staircases and suits of armour, and openings in the walls where the wind can blow, sounding like a dangerous beasts' howls. Let's not be afraid by mere sounds and Hogwarts' everyday events."

Justin paused. "Wasn't yesterday's noise more of a slithering nature?"

Harry looked around surreptitiously. Several students and a few teachers had received the newspapers, and they were going through it at different paces. However, the noisy reactions it elicited quickly brought everyone up-to-date with Harry's article. McGonagall folded her copy in the appropriate way to show the article to Dumbledore, and the old man frowned for a while, before looking thoughtful. He then went to his Potion Master and gave him the journal, pointing at the offending article and whispering something.

Several students were looking at the two men, but Dumbledore's only words had been to tell the man not to react, something Snape could do very well. Even when his Headmaster asked him to lie through his lack of reaction. Even if one of them was more concerned than the other, both men knew that the school's future was in line. As well as their own.

Dumbledore returned to his seat but stayed upright. "Students, I would like your attention for a short moment."

The Hall grew silent and he continued. "I just read an article that, judging by your exclamations, you completed before me. Privilege of youth." he said, smiling, while several chuckles could be heard around the Hall. "I just wanted to confirm that what is printed is what happened. We are investigating the particular noises you heard yesterday, to see if winds are able to produce it, but, as you already know, with magic, everything is possible. Our Potion mishap doesn't seem it has anything to do with it, though, and that's what I told Mister Homest yesterday. That will be all, thank you." he finished, and sat down.

Good show, thought Harry, before returning to the task at hand, eating the foot-high pile of pancakes he had been stacking before Dumbledore's speech.

He finished his breakfast several minutes after most of the students had left for their first period, and there were only a few students from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw there. He grabbed his schoolbag and left the Great Hall with a decided look. After the first empty corner, he Apparated out and headed for the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom, where he was sure to find the Gryffindor and Slytherin first years – he had long since memorized Tracey's and Ron's schedules.

The class had already started and the students were settled into pairs. Judging by the unique word shouted by the students, they were practising the same Disarming spell he had already been subjected to.

Focusing on the auras, he found the two dark ones he sought quite easily, and noticed that Pansy and Millicent were in opposite corners in the large room. Professor Fortin was moving between the pairs, straightening a posture here, and demonstrating the wand movement there. As she was nearing Millicent, Harry decided to check on Pansy, and noticed that the girl was... expectant? He delved inside the girl's unprotected peripheral thoughts. She was waiting for something before attacking her opponent.

Harry looked to the other side of the small platform and noticed that her target was Tracey. Pansy wanted to curse Tracey? He would have none of it. As the girls, following an invisible indication, put themselves in position, Harry hurled himself in Pansy's mind.

Pansy was casting a spell, and it wasn't the Disarming one. However, his presence in her mind disturbed her enough for the aim to be completely off, and the Cutting Curse only sliced Tracey's shoulder. Harry knew that, had the curse been well-aimed, it would have cut the girl's throat. Pansy's peripheral thoughts reflected her intentions of repeating the Disarming spell a few times afterwards, so as to claim that the slit throat was only a result of pushing the other girl away.

She hadn't counted on Tracey's spell hitting home, though, and was thrown backwards. She fell on her back on the stone ground surrounding the platform, knocked into unconsciousness.

It helped Harry, because the first half-second of surprise at his intrusion hadn't lasted long and Pansy's mind had started reacting violently. However, being knocked down had slowed her thought processes, and Harry had enough time to repeat the actions he had already taken against Daphne: removing all influence Voldemort was having on the girl and binding her conscious mind inside her own consciousness building.

In the classroom, the event had drawn attention from almost everyone, and the teacher ran to the two students, frowning when she noticed blood soaking Tracey's shoulder. As her professorship involved it, she knew about the Prior Incantatem spell and used it on both girls' wands. Eyebrows rose when it revealed that Pansy had preferred training her marksmanship than the spell. Professor Fortin took points from the still prone girl for endangering the life of others, and sent the two of them to the Hospital Wing, the unconscious Pansy being carried there by Millicent, who had volunteered. The strong girl didn't forget to take Pansy's bag too.

Still hidden, Harry followed them. It was always tiring him to move bits of Voldemort's soul from one mind to another, and he wasn't quite able to treat Millicent immediately, especially when she wasn't unconscious. He decided to wait for another lesson to take care of the problem.

Later, he would regret not having pushed himself further.

The week progressed at a snail's pace. Even Snape's acid comments during the double Potion period didn't speed it up. Incidentally, the week's recipe was for the Draught of Slowness.

Harry didn't see Millicent anymore, even when he asked Cassie and when he Apparated to the Slytherin girl's dorms at random times. Even the Chamber of Secrets was constantly empty. Tracey and Ron confirmed that the girl had been missing classes since Monday's happenstance. Reflecting about it, Harry understood that the girl was

protecting herself, having noticed that Pansy and Daphne were out of the picture already.

The two bed-ridden girls hadn't made any progress toward awakening, and, by now, Snape had been given the task of waking them. Since he didn't know what had happened, though, it took him a long time to explore the girls' memories.

The last course of the week, for the Ravenclaw-Hufflepuff group, was Transfiguration. Once again, they had to transform a mundane item into another, something which was boring Harry to bits. He wasn't that good that he could do it in the first try, but he generally succeeded a few attempts after Hermione. He knew he could progress to perfection by copying memories from the girl or even from the professor, but he also knew that it would be cheating, and that he would have nothing to do afterwards if he did. As he was already bored, he decided not to.

In the middle of an otherwise perfectly performed transfiguration attempt, he heard something which broke his concentration, and the quill, instead of transforming into a sugar-coated one, finished its short life as a blob of water which spilled on Harry's desk, eliciting a yelp from Hermione.

Harry was pale, but it wasn't because of it. It was because of a voice which the others still seemed to ignore.

"I smell blood!"

"Professor!" he exclaimed suddenly, his hand raised.

"What is it, Mister Thomson?"

"Can I go to the bathroom, please?" he asked innocently. Perhaps a little too innocently, but he played his act appropriately, not adding the puppy-eyed look which would look suspicious.

McGonagall had sensed the urgency in the boy's words and sent him outside.

As soon as he left the classroom, Harry took Merlin's wand out again and locked the door. He then Apparated out and checked with Cassie to see if there were students out. As it was 11:30am, there were only a few of them in the open. Outside, the fifth year Gryffindors and Ravenclaws had Care of the Magical Creatures while the seventh year of all Houses, having a free period, were playing a pick-up game of Quidditch to relieve themselves of the upcoming exams' stress. Paul and Virginia were... sitting closely... in the Astronomy Tower.

Because the Basilisk was heading to the Entrance Hall, Harry Apparated there and locked the doors again. It gave him an unsettling feeling of déjà vu, but he shook it away and went to his dorm, where he took his cage of roosters from his trunk. Extracting and enlarging one of them, he proceeded in hunting the large snake.

It wasn't leading anywhere, though, as the Basilisk perceived the rooster's crowing long before the sound could actually harm it, and he fled the place, with cries of "Blood can wait. I'll be back!"

Harry sighed, before returning to his dorm. Shrinking the cockerel again and deciding that it would be best to have them handy, he stored the whole cage inside the locket he was always wearing. A quick trip allowed him to unlock the Entrance doors before he actually went to the bathroom to wet his hands. He then unlocked the Transfiguration classroom from afar and had just the time to store his wand in his locket again before a worried McGonagall bolted through the door, her wand at the ready.

"Mister Thomson!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"I went to the toilets, professor." he answered, wiping his wet hands on his robe for good measure.

"Hurry inside at once!" she said, ushering him inside before asking "Didn't you hear strange sounds?"

He took the stance of someone thinking about it, and could swear he felt Hermione's mental roll of eyes. "No." he said.

The period finished twenty minutes later, but the students were too disturbed to produce anything, and the teacher was too worried to care about it.

Another week went by without news from either Millicent or the Basilisk. It wasn't the case with Voldemort, though. During his Defence Against the Dark Arts practical period, Harry received a mental signal that Voldemort was active again. The signal wasn't strong enough to bother him by itself, but it disturbed him nonetheless. Harry was so happy about his just-tested mind protection that his attention slipped and he lost his duel to Susan's Disarming spell. She gave his wand back and he sat for a second, pretending to recover.

He was, in fact, using his Metamorphmagus ability to check that his appearance hadn't changed without him knowing. Once satisfied, he browsed the memories brought to him through his link to Voldemort, and gasped. The man was planning an attack on Hogwarts? He rewound it and listened intently. Apparently, Voldemort wasn't much interested in Hogwarts itself, but in a few particular items he didn't talk about.

The Dark Lord wanted the Death Eaters who had children in school to attend the forthcoming Quidditch game and to play interference should the need arise. At the same time, he would take advantage of the Animagus powers of Pettigrew again – he was still possession the rat-like man – and would search the castle. And, once the match was finished, the Death Eaters would trap Snape and bring him in. Even if Pettigrew's shape was sometimes interesting, his whining voice wasn't, and Voldemort missed a tall and impressive body with a strong and commanding voice.

Harry smiled, and returned to his immediate surroundings. Susan was shaking his shoulder.

“What is it?” he asked.

“You gasped, there. Are you alright?”

He looked at her inquiringly, before remembering his earlier reaction to Voldemort's plan. "I'm fine." he said, nodding for emphasis. "I was just recovering. Ready for a rematch?"

She agreed, and they playfully exchanged spells for the remainder of the period.

Two days later, the Quidditch game between Slytherin and Ravenclaw took place, and more people than usual came to witness it. Even if it wasn't unusual for parents to come cheer their progeny on these occasions, they seldom came in so large numbers, especially parents of Slytherin students. Despite sensing that something was amiss, Dumbledore and Snape couldn't very well act since they were already seated and they weren't enough to keep the children safe should a battle occur.

At the same time, a rat, a boy, a girl, and a snake were all converging toward a hidden room.

When Harry arrived in the Chamber of Secrets, he saw Millicent's body lying on the cold ground. After probing her mind, he discovered that Voldemort's influence had completely disappeared and that her magical reserve was very low.

Outside, the Ravensclaws had started to show an ingenious way to play, temporarily using the Seeker as Keeper while said Keeper played Chaser. Renata was guarding the loops while Erwan used his considerable strength to throw cannonballs through the Slytherin hoops, and their team was starting to lead with 60 points to none.

"Olmata's Outnumbering is a move I found in old newspapers retelling the Quidditch games of the 14th century." Hermione proudly said to Ron while they both cheered.

"Isn't it dangerous for the goal to be left unguarded?" asked Ron.

"It can be, but the Seeker is there to prevent backfiring problems."

As the action picked up, Ron said nothing, but he was still unsure that the lithe Seeker could stop the large Quaffle. He was glad, however,

that Hermione was interested in Quidditch despite her aversion to flying, even if that was to dig unheard-of strategies in dusty newspapers.

Harry was cautiously advancing toward the prone body. Nobody seemed to lurk in the surrounding shadows, and he looked at Millicent's overturned orbits. He was just grabbing her hand, intending to Apparate her to the Hospital wing, when he heard somebody talk behind him. He didn't have time to turn, though, as the talk had been a spell incantation.

"Stupefy."

Cursing his stupidity, he fell into unconsciousness.

On the pitch, the repeated Outnumbering move from the Ravenclaw eventually found a counter-offensive coming their way. Hermione had been good at researching the manoeuvre but even Ron could have told her that repeating the same move again and again was due to build resistance from the other side. It wasn't Hermione's fault, though, as the Quidditch Captain's was responsible for his team's play.

The Slytherin team, true to their habit, had decided to apply the first rule of Scrimgeour's book, taking out the Seeker. Taking advantage of the lithe girl's steady position, they threw a successfully intercepted Quaffle straight at her, the two Bludgers following suit.

Renata could have thought strategically, but she wasn't the Captain. She could have thought that it was better to lose 10 points than 150, but she wasn't seeing the Bludgers. She was focused on her task and blocked the Quaffle successfully, even if the massive ball pushed her backward a little. Her smile faltered when she noticed the horrified expressions of her team-mates, though, and it was her last conscious thought as the two Bludgers hit her.

"Enervate."

The spell woke Harry and he found himself looking at Pettigrew's face. He tried to move away but quickly discovered the ropes binding him.

“No, no, no, little one.” he said. “You aren’t going anywhere.”

“Except in her belly.” said another male voice, younger and stronger.

Pettigrew chuckled. “Yes, you are going there, aren’t you?”

Harry glanced at the other man and discovered a young adult looking back at him.

“You are... you are...” he said, not quite grasping the concept even if he knew the dark aura around him.

“I am Lord Voldemort.” he said, smirking, while Pettigrew chuckled at the inside joke.

“I am, too.” said Pettigrew. “And we are going to merge.”

“That will finish siphoning that tramp’s life.” the other stated, his left foot kicking Millicent’s body. The girl didn’t react, and Harry felt bad for her. Despite the horrendous act of leading the Basilisk through the school, he knew it hadn’t been by her own will.

“And then,” started Pettigrew, his voice turning cold, “you are both going to die.”

The two men faced each other and began to chant an incantation in Parseltongue, and Harry looked at the proceedings with wide eyes. Visibly, the two versions of the Dark Lord knew what they were doing, as they both transformed into a dark swirl that Harry knew all too well. The younger one did, while, actually, smoke erupted from Pettigrew’s body and the man dropped on the floor, unmoving. Harry also noticed that dark strands escaped from Millicent’s body too, strengthening the raising Dark Lord.

Harry decided to help her, but he needed to hide as well. With his hands behind his back, he fumbled for hers and eventually took hold of one. He then Apparated both of them out slowly so as to make as little noise as possible. Knowing that the rat Animagus was the perfect spying tool, Harry also decided to take him off the equation

while he was defenceless. Apparating in, he took the man's wand away and recovered his own before shrinking him and stowing him in one of the empty Unbreakable bottles he always carried with him nowadays.

After returning to the gaseous reality, Harry decided to help Millicent and infiltrated her mind. He noticed the swirling blackness taking everything away, and concentrated very hard. The next second, an enormous vacuum cleaner appeared, and Harry, despite a sudden and pounding headache, started to transfer the malevolent influence to the insulated part of his own mind.

The Quidditch match was slowly turning into a nightmare for the Ravensclaws. The Slytherins were committing several fouls, but the Ravenclaw Chasers were so tired and hurt that they couldn't aim their penalties properly. The whole stadium was rumbling in anger at the snaky approach, but Madam Hooch, who was referring using the standard rules for Professional Quidditch, couldn't do anything but let the game proceed. The assembled Death Eaters were smiling as one, as they were mostly parents of Slytherin students or Slytherin themselves.

There was one obstacle to Slytherin's complete dominion, though. Erwan had howled like a madman when Renata had fallen from her broom, and after she left for the Hospital Wing, he retook his spot at the hoops, his eyes gleaming with anger.

He had then successfully blocked many of the attempts, even when Bludgers were aimed on him at the same time. He already had sore arms and a broken leg, but he wasn't feeling it, his mind completely focused on the game. The only times he couldn't block the Quaffle was when the Slytherins were openly fouling him. And even then, he fouled them back, exchanging an eye for an eye. It didn't disturb him anyways because, when playing the penalties, the players were forced to use the Quaffle without the Bludgers around, and Erwan didn't have problems blocking that.

The score was stalling at 140-100, the Slytherins in the lead, when the large teen did his last save. He had blocked the Quaffle and thrown it back forward with all his might. He had then grasped the

incoming Bludger with his bare hands, throwing it toward the Slytherin Chasers, and he was wondering where the other was, when...

Whack!

The answer came to the back of his head in a painful manner, and he followed Renata's steps.

In the Chamber of Secrets, the two versions of the Dark Lord were still going at it, a dark shape quickly emerging from the hissing cloud. After a few more minutes, the shape acquired more refined human features, until it resembled his own self. It was still in a spirit form, but stronger than before. Harry could feel it even without openly sensing the aura, and he concentrated on not doing anything that could reveal his position. Despite knowing that Dumbledore could somehow feel his presence when he was in the gaseous reality, he didn't know if that was a talent many wizards shared.

Voldemort's spirit smiled, before opening his eyes, looking away with a smirk. However, when he glanced down, the smirk melted into an angry scowl.

"Wormtail!" he called, referring to Pettigrew's nickname. "Where are you, you rat!" he called, glancing around. In doing so, he also noticed Millicent and Harry's absence and the fallen ropes, and he growled. "Don't you dare betray me, Wormtail! You know my wrath would be terrible!"

Still no answer from the empty corridors. Pettigrew couldn't answer anyways, since he was unconscious and shrunk and locked away in an Unbreakable bottle.

"Very well!" hissed Voldemort, before turning to the gigantic statue taking the whole wall opposite the entrance. Raising his arms, he started to incant in Parseltongue again, and Harry felt his insides transform into lead. Metaphorically, of course, as it was only because of the noise coming from behind the statue.

The Basilisk was there, hissing his bloodlust, answering the chant.

The door was opening gradually, and Harry decided to take advantage of that slowness to do something about the Basilisk as well. Still in the gaseous reality, he passed through the door and discovered, around the creature, a large and dank round corridor heading away. He continued forward, passing the Basilisk, and only stopped at some distance from it.

Once there, he took the roosters cage out of his locket and enlarged it, before casting a Sonorus spell on the chickens inside. He knew of the spell thanks to the previous Quidditch games, where it was often used on Lee Jordan for him to comment about the game loudly.

Harry returned to tangibility with the chicken, and the cackling seemed to startle the Basilisk, which started to hammer at the half-open door in fear, but Harry wasn't finished. Pointing at the corridor's high ceiling, he incanted a quick spell. One of the first he had learnt, and one of the ones he had used the most in his numerous fights.

“Lumos.”

Being tricked into believing that the sun had risen, the roosters chanted their cry at the same time. The resulting simultaneous Cock-a-doodle-doo was thunderous and Harry's ears ringed for a long time afterwards, even after he Silenced them. Checking the overgrown snake, he found that it wasn't moving anymore, blood oozing from places he thought could be the creature's ears. Checking with his mind as well, he made sure that the creature was dead before stowing the chickens' cage in his locket and turning his light out.

At the same time, a shout of rage came from the Chamber. The Quidditch match wasn't going well for the Ravenclaws. In the last few minutes, they had been outnumbered and outgunned, and suffered several goals while only scoring one. The dreadful score was of 220-120 and the Snitch had yet to be discovered by Terence Higgs, the Slytherin Seeker.

The boy didn't seem to be in a hurry, though. He played right as their Captain had told him to. With no other Seeker in front of him, he actually didn't have to catch the Snitch until the Captain told him so –

when he judged that enough goals had been scored, actually. He had even noticed the golden ball fluttering here and there, but hadn't moved at all. His only goal had been to evade the Bludgers, but the opposing team was already hard-pressed with the Chasers and very few Bludgers headed his way anyway.

He wasn't the only one who had seen the Snitch, though. Brutus Armstrong was one of the two Ravenclaw Beaters. He was in his fourth year but was already strong and fierce. He had seen the Snitch several times already, and had cursed their enemies for having dropped Renata so brutally. He had played the brute himself, though, disrupting the Slytherin attack formation and causing a few broken bones in retaliation.

The Snitch came back, hovering next to him as he was guarding the hoops again, as if to taunt him. If only he could take the fluttering ball! But he knew the rules: only the Seeker could grasp that ball. Any other player would cause the team to lose the Snitch's 150 points value and end the game.

He looked at the ball, suddenly smiling. Brutus was a muggleborn, and had practised an interesting sport during his childhood: billiard. No one in the wizarding world had been interested and that passion had fallen back into a summer hobby, but he was having the idea of the century. Seeing an incoming Bludger, he didn't bat it away as he usually did, but sent him straight at the golden ball.

It was much more difficult with balls moving around in three dimensions, but, eventually, he managed to control the fluttering golden ball somewhat. It took him several tries, during which the Slytherins took advantage of his departure from the goals to score four more times. At the end, however, he was located right under the Slytherin goals during one of Ravenclaw's feeble attempts at scoring. He aimed, hoping he was right, and struck the Bludger.

What happened next would be the talk of the whole school for a long time.

Harry Apparated out and headed back in the Chamber.

Despite having mixed his soul bits into one, resulting in a stronger spirit, Voldemort was angry. He had wanted to exit the castle unnoticed but Pettigrew had vanished! Despite Voldemort's loathing of the rat-like man, he had his numerous uses. The girl had disappeared as well, and with her disappeared the diary. The journal was now devoid of traces of himself, but it was still a giveaway of his manipulations.

The thing that had made him cry of rage, though, was before him. Dead. The door had been almost completely opened when he had heard the deafening crowing and, seeing the large corpse before him, he understood that his precious weapon was dead.

Last but not least, the younger-looking Voldemort was less powerful than envisioned. Voldemort had appraised his global power before but found himself with just a quarter of what he had intended to get from the merging. Stronger, yes, but just by 25 percent. The Basilisk would have been helpful in his reconquest of the wizarding world, but he was now alone, and less powerful than envisioned. It was annoying him, and Voldemort wasn't prone to annoyance. It made him angry.

With a last inarticulate shriek, the spirit shot up and through the ceiling. He would need to regroup.

Harry saw only an angry shape of a man, but couldn't fathom all the reasons of his rage, despite suspecting that Pettigrew's kidnapping and the Basilisk's death played a large part in it. Having nothing more to do in the Chamber, he took hold of Millicent's still immobile body and headed for the Hospital Wing through the gaseous reality. Pomfrey was there already, tending to two severely beaten Quidditch players. Ravenclaws, if their blue uniforms were of any indication. While waiting for the nurse to leave, Harry browsed Millicent's mind, checking for remains of Voldemort's occupation. He found none and left the girl's consciousness as it was: bound in a corner of her consciousness building. Like Daphne's and Pansy's.

Hearing noise in the corridor – students celebrating the outcome of the game –, Pomfrey left the room to ask for quietness and Harry took advantage of the temporary pause to Apparate in, drop Millicent

on a bed near Pansy and Daphne, and Apparate out again. It took him three seconds while the nurse's complaint about the noise lasted five. When she returned inside, the Hospital Matron gasped, shocked. How could another student suddenly appear, unconscious, in a bed?

It was in this shocked state that she admitted several people inside. The Quidditch game was finished, and the broken limbs needed her skill. She recovered quickly and, sensing that the game itself was a sore topic just now, she put the two teams in separate rooms, before casting the appropriate Healer spells.

Harry stayed in the room for a while. He had completely missed the game and the retelling was heartening. Despite dragging the Ravensclaws to their knees, it seemed that the Slytherin had lost, and Harry smirked. It was the birds' day, not the snake's, he thought, before leaving.

Dumbledore returned to his office after having seen all the parents out. He knew that several of them had ties with the Dark Lord, but couldn't accuse them in the open like that. Besides, they hadn't done anything wrong, today. There had just been a collective move from them during the game, as they all looked, frightened, in the same direction. And it wasn't toward the pitch. But they looked to each other afterwards, seeming thoroughly confused, before returning their attention to the match. Speaking of which...

Dumbledore smiled. That save from the Beater had been something to behold. Using an unknown move, the teenager had pushed the Snitch right in the Slytherin Keeper's hands, causing a Snitchslip. The aged Headmaster wasn't a Quidditch aficionado but, as his position required, he had seen numerous games and could notice an unusual move when he saw it.

That had been pure genius and had saved Ravensclaw's day.

Shaking the stray thoughts from his mind, Dumbledore looked down at his desk and frowned. Another message?

Myrtle's bathroom (out-of-order girls' toilets on second floor). Come now, and alone.

He pocketed the message and, darting to his private quarters, fetched his most trusted protection artefacts. He was determined to know the truth, but not to fall into a trap. Equipped with a battle robe charmed to look like his usual starry ones, a circlet blocking any kind of mind control, his regular wand and two spares, and several rings to enhance his own magic, he left his office.

The only person he saw on his way was McGonagall. After a quick chat with Hooch, the Deputy Headmistress had intended to see him about the Quidditch game. In her mind, Professional Quidditch rules for student games were too harsh and allowed too much leeway for Slytherin's brutal and unfair style. And the playing children didn't have professional players' resiliency.

Her plans were delayed a bit when she noticed the Headmaster's gait and equipment.

"Albus? Are you going to battle?" she asked, half-amused and half-curious.

"I don't know, Minerva." he answered truthfully. "Can you guard the door?" he asked, nodding at the girls' toilets.

"Albus!" she scolded. "It's a girls' bathroom! And it's out of order!"

"I know." he said gravely. "Just keep the door, alright?"

She looked at him in disbelief, before nodding, and he entered. McGonagall looked at the closing door in wonder. Why would Dumbledore, equipped with his full battle gear, enter a girls' bathroom?

Inside the room, Dumbledore looked around. His charmed glasses would report any invisible person and he trusted his reflexes to react quickly to any threat. Even if they didn't, his garb would protect him. It hadn't failed him yet.

"It's not a good day for snakes, Headmaster." a male voice echoed in the empty room.

“Who’s there? Show yourself!” Dumbledore demanded.

A chuckle answered. “Names, names, Headmaster. You know me. Even Tonks knows me, now.”

‘Tonks?’ reflected Dumbledore. ‘What did she have to do with...’

He stopped and, aloud, came to the appropriate conclusion. “You are Jerry Homest.”

“Right in one, Headmaster. Don’t move, please.” said Harry, as he perceived the Headmaster’s aura moving around the pillar of sinks behind which he was hidden.

“Why did you want us to meet here?” asked Dumbledore.

“Because I want to show you something, and you certainly want to ask me numerous questions.” Harry replied. “I warn you, though: I won’t answer all of them.”

“Fair enough. What did you want to show me?”

“You do know what a Parselmouth is, Headmaster. You taught to at least one of them.” Harry said, and Dumbledore nodded.

Catching his movement, Harry continued. “It is reported that Salazar Slytherin was one. It is reported that Salazar Slytherin built the Chamber of Secrets. It is a known fact that most private rooms in this castle are protected with a password.”

“Well... yes. And?”

Harry smirked. Switching to Parseltongue, he hissed “Open.”

Dumbledore jumped and looked at the pillar of sinks opened. In front of him, on the other side of the now-split pillar, stood the moustached man, and the Headmaster drew his wand.

“Please, Headmaster.” Harry said gently, showing his empty hands.

Dumbledore considered his options. He could very well stun him. However, the man in front of him had been an unnamed ally for some time, now, and he was reluctant to do so. Besides, the gleam in the man’s eyes told him that, even empty-handed, he had hidden cards in his sleeves. A whole deck of them.

He lowered his wand. “Very well. What is this?”

“This is one of the entries to the Chamber of Secrets. I don’t know all of them, but there are many of them scattered throughout the school.”

“The Chamber...” Dumbledore whispered, looking far away. His gaze hardened quickly, though. “How did you know about it?”

“I discussed with Myrtle, and she told me that the snake that killed her came out of here. Other people knew it as well, though.”

“Myrtle? Snake? Other people?”

“Myrtle Stenvenson was killed right here, fifty years ago. You do remember this, Headmaster?”

The old man nodded, and Harry continued. “It was by a Basilisk, not an Acromantula. Hagrid is innocent. You have to do whatever it takes to overturn his judgements, both the one of 50 years ago and the last one. He is feeling quite alone in the Forest, you know. And hungry, too.”

“How do you know?” Dumbledore asked suspiciously.

Harry smiled. “I brought him food, once or thrice.”

As Dumbledore was still silent, considering the half-giant’s fate, Harry continued. “The three other people able to enter the Chamber have been dealt with. They are recovering in the Hospital Wing, and I’m

sure your Potion Master can free them from their Voldemort-induced coma.”

The aged Headmaster looked up sharply. “You don’t seem to have a problem saying his name.”

“Why should I?”

“He’s the Dark Lord...”

“He’s a spirit, now. Possessing people seems to be one of his preferred jobs at the moment.” stated Harry before tapping a finger to his lips pensively. “I wonder who will be the next one.”

“What do you mean?”

Harry took the bottle with Pettigrew inside and tossed it to the Headmaster, who caught it deftly. “You recognize him?”

Dumbledore looked at the shrunk man intently before gasping. “Peter!”

“Yes.” Harry said. “Peter Pettigrew. I think you have everything you need to free Sirius Black, now?”

“Why?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Because Pettigrew was the Potters’ Secret Keeper. It’s clear as day in his memories. And he framed Black, before hiding in the Weasleys’ house in his Animagus form: a rat.”

Dumbledore nodded and pocketed the bottle, before frowning. “You are a Legilimens.” he said, concluding the line of thoughts started by Harry’s previous sentences.

“Was I that obvious?”

“Did you modify the two Hufflepuff students’ memories when they went from the cupboard to their common room?”

“Yes. As I said earlier, I have many secrets and I don’t want people blabbing about them.” Harry answered, before looking gravely at the Headmaster. “Or others finding them in these students’ memories.”

A pause.

“ You changed their memories, though. It’s quite a crime.” Dumbledore stated and, ignoring Harry’s snort, he continued. “You did it to others?”

“Please, Headmaster! Of course I did it to others. My very life depends on my ability to hide this kind of secrets. And don’t you tell me that changing memories is a crime. You still lodge a teacher who Obliviated one of your students. And you often peer into people’s memories as well.”

“Still, I’m not-”

“As muggles say, Headmaster, it is quite the same to commit a crime, to make someone do it for you, or to protect someone who did it. Besides, I don’t have all night. Do you want to jump first or last?”

Dumbledore straightened up, quickly considering his options. “I’ll go.” and he jumped.

A few minutes later, both men were standing in the large Chamber, in front of the statue’s open mouth.

“How did you...” started Dumbledore.

“I didn’t know how to open that particular door.” Harry answered. “I had to wait, only reacting when the snake attacked the school.”

“You were in the school? I didn’t feel anyone else than the usual crowd.”

“There are many ways of hiding oneself, Headmaster, and I’m not ready to reveal all my secrets to you either.” He smiled innocently, his

moustache twitching. "Let's just say that I wasn't far. To finish, my story, I had to let Voldemort open it-"

"Voldemort is here?" Dumbledore asked, his wand raising again as he looked around.

"Correction: he was here. He entered as Pettigrew and asked his Death Eaters to play interference should anything happen."

"So that's why they were so many..." said Dumbledore, remembering the Quidditch game. He looked up suddenly, staring at Harry. "How did you know all this?"

"You are wondering if I'm a Death Eater myself? The answer is no. But I'm very well informed."

"How?"

"This is my secret."

"Another one, you mean."

"Exactly." Harry answered, a twinkle of his own in his eyes, and Dumbledore had the eerie feeling of standing in front of a younger version of himself, with the same load of secrets and everything.

"So. Voldemort was here." Dumbledore tried to sum up. "He entered as Peter but Peter is now in my pocket..."

"Yes. Voldemort escaped as a spirit." Harry continued, smirking. "He was quite angry when he noticed that his host had disappeared."

"You snatched Peter from under Voldemort's nose?"

"Yes. I was afraid about Snape, though. But last time I checked, he seemed very well, so they mustn't have touched him."

"What do you mean about Snape?"

“The Death Eaters had the secondary mission of capturing him. Voldemort preferred posing as Snape rather than Pettigrew.” He smiled. “One can wonder why.” He looked thoughtful for a moment, before coming to a conclusion. “Perhaps Voldemort’s anger at finding Pettigrew missing disturbed them.”

“How comes he didn’t see you taking Peter away?” asked Dumbledore.

“It was easy, really. He and his younger self were busy merg-

“WHAT?” Dumbledore interrupted.

“Oh. Sorry I went too far. You remember my notes?”

Dumbledore nodded, not understanding the link.

“In one of them, I told you about Pansy, Daphne, and Millicent.”

“Yes.”

“They seem to have discovered this.” Harry said, taking the infamous diary out of his numerous pockets and showing it to Dumbledore. While the old man was looking at it, wondering why it was empty, Harry continued. “It seems Voldemort stored a part of himself in it, and that part started to control the girls, pushing them to open the Chamber and unleash the Basilisk on the school.”

“Stored...” muttered the old man. “A part of himself...”

“Yes. But he got out and rejoined with the spirit that was possessing Pettigrew. That’s when I could snatch the rat from under his nose. Or theirs. At that moment, I didn’t know how many they were. There’s an interesting thing, though.”

“What is it?”

“By rough estimation, I’d say that only a quarter of what was contained in these pages returned to Voldemort.”

“Where is the rest?” asked Dumbledore.

Harry pointed at his head, and the aged Headmaster looked at him with eyes as wide as saucers, before recoiling, drawing his wand again.

“Don’t fear.” said Harry. “I imprisoned that part quite well. I’m just at a loss about what I should do with it. It’s rather cumbersome.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you want me to pour it all back to the diary, so that you’d be able to see what it was like for the girls? Do you want the thing yourself, risking possession if your barriers aren’t strong enough? Or do you have another idea?”

They stayed silent for a moment, before Dumbledore reached a decision and he gave him the diary. “I’d say that you can put it back in the book. If it doesn’t cooperate later, we can always destroy it.”

“Alright.”

“I have another question. How did you kill the Basilisk?”

“I brought cocks here.”

“You what?”

“I bought some cockerels in London and I carried them all the time, waiting for the proper moment. That moment came and the beast fell to the chickens.” He smirked. “As I said at that particular moment, it wasn’t the snakes’ day, rather the birds’.”

They both smiled at this, remembering the Quidditch match's outcome as well, before walking back to the surface through one of

the numerous corridors. Harry had never used that mean before, but Cassie led him as soon as they left the zone of the hiding charm around the Chamber. When Harry and Dumbledore separated in the Entrance Hall, Harry promised not to reveal anything about the Chamber in the news, while Dumbledore promised to investigate the castle's security more thoroughly. However, even he couldn't enter the Parseltongue-protected Chamber, and Harry promised to help him in that regard. After all, if the Basilisk's size was something to judge by, the large corridor behind the Chamber of Secrets must have led to a place with much food, perhaps in the Forbidden Forest. And it wouldn't be good to have a horde of unknown – and potentially dangerous – creatures invading the school through the Chamber. The following month passed swiftly. Dumbledore told everyone that the "thing which made noise in the corridors" had been found and destroyed. Harry told his three closest friends about his whole adventures and they scolded him for being so reckless, before lunging at him, thanking him for his devotion for them and the school. Afterwards, the four of them had a blast writing a few articles for the Daily Prophet, telling several meaningless things about Harry Potter for one part, and Hogwarts for the other.

Using the same technique than when he entered minds, Harry also succeeded in transferring the inactive parts of Voldemort's influence from his mind to the diary, before giving it to Dumbledore for safekeeping and study. He knew that the Headmaster would take the appropriate protections against possession and theft. From the Dark Lord's shroud, Harry only kept a channel for eventual visions and the few skills he had gotten from the Dark wizard, cleaned of every bits of malevolence they had been soiled with.

He then had the surprise of unearthing memories of his early childhood, and he spent a long time browsing them, sorting them, basking in the memories of the love his parents had for him. In these memories, he also recognised Black and Lupin, and Pettigrew, and it heartened him that the Headmaster had successfully convinced the Minister of Hagrid's and Black's innocence. It sure made the front page of every newspaper, and the Daily Prophet maintained his

advance in sales by displaying Jerry Homest's in-depth articles... right after the trials.

Hagrid had returned from his hideout, and Dumbledore, backed by the Ministry's bill declaring the half-giant innocent, had given him several choices. Hagrid had refused to go back to school as a student, but had looked eager to assist professor Kettleburn in his course on Care of the Magical Creatures – the aged teacher had lost a few parts of his anatomy to the course's material and, eager to retire, he appreciated the giant's help.

Harry gave Hagrid his egg back, and the relieved half-giant hugged him so forcefully that he was sure he had a broken rib or two, even though he increased his toughness – if he hadn't, he would have been plainly crushed. The four students were invited to see Norbert's hatching and had a shock when they noticed that it was a dragon. Ron told them that his brother Charlie was good with dragons but that it wasn't a pet to be kept in a wooden house. After several starts of fire, Hagrid reluctantly agreed and Harry Apparated everyone to Romania, where Hagrid could see Charlie and the other dragons. Harry brought them back a short time afterwards and removed the memory of the long-distance Apparation from Hagrid's memory.

Remus Lupin and Sirius Black discovered each other after ten years of parting, and they both were shocked by the other's ragged appearance. After shedding many tears on their fate and their friends', they vowed to take care of themselves, and of Harry, if they could find him. After living in Hogwarts for a few days, Sirius' smile returned a bit, although he wasn't able to cope very well with that many people around him. He decided to redecorate his house at number 12, Grimmauld Place, and hired a wizard contractor. It did cost him a bit of money, but he could largely afford it, especially as the Ministry had given him a large sum in order to apologize for his wrongful imprisonment. The Ministry's rhetoric made him grin, sometimes, although it was a sad smile.

The most difficult aspect of the house overhaul was his mother's portrait hanging on the side wall of the Entrance Hall. Technically, it wasn't hanging, but sticking on the wall. The animated portrait had started yelling profanities the moment workers entered the house, but

they found a workaround to the seemingly permanent sticking charm. After Sirius agreed, the team of workers blasted the whole wall away, and the portrait yelled a last time before crumbling with the rubble. It was easier to work, then, and the house quickly acquired a look of openness, with large rooms and equally large windows in each room, even the bathrooms. It was a bit tricky to add windows in inner rooms or in the basement, but, with magic, anything was possible. Sirius even smiled when he overheard one of the workers telling another that it wasn't as if they had to bring the sea to the house. He contacted his contractor the same day and updated the contract, giving the man *carte blanche*.

The final result was a set of three houses, interlinked with a private network of portals disguised as mere doors. The first was Sirius' original house, the second was the Shrieking Shack, and the third was a nice house on the Isle of Wright, facing the sea.

As Harry had suggested, Snape had taken care of the three Slytherin girls and, through intensive study, they had just recovered from the lag in their studies. Tracey had hinted a time or two that they would learn faster by comparing notes with people from other Houses, and the Slytherin study group had actually thought about it, before rejecting the idea. Tracey had been happy, though, because her idea hadn't been shot down immediately like it would have been before.

The Slytherin-Hufflepuff Quidditch game was the first with an adapted set of rules, preventing harsh and debilitating injuries. Snape had protested, arguing that it wasn't preparing the children for the "real life out there," but even he could see that having ten people out of fourteen in the Hospital Wing after a game wasn't a good thing, and he reluctantly agreed. Besides, after adapting their game play, the Slytherin team won anyway. After all, even Snape knew that only a few graduates had a chance at professional Quidditch, and that the deceitful Slytherins weren't generally included in that lot.

May passed by as well, with the whole school in an exam-prepping frenzy. Hermione, like many Ravenclaws and a few studious students from other Houses, had her nose in books and was constantly quizzing herself and others. The end-of-year exams finally took place during the first week of June, and Madam Pomfrey had to deliver her first doses of Calming Draught to help the depressed students.

The last Quidditch game of the season happened right after the exams, and pitted Gryffindor against Ravenclaw. Harry smiled when he witnessed the game, as both Hermione and Ron had had a hand in the strategies involved. Hermione had used her free time to unearth other interesting tactics from old newspapers and tomes again, having learnt that only one wasn't going to be successful. Ron had explained a few strategies from his Quidditch book – Harry's Christmas gift – to his Captain and the red-and-gold team had a few counterattack moves down their sleeve. The game finished with a score of 310 to 190 for Gryffindor, Ron grasping the Snitch from under Renata's nose after a hectic chase.

As was the case when there was nothing else to do, the two final weeks of school were anti-climactic. Students were everywhere, resting from the previous month's strain. A few of them still had to work to turn projects in, but, with no classes, the atmosphere was much more relaxed. Some people just couldn't stop themselves, though, and Hermione started her summer homework early, trying to push the SAGES to follow her. They understood her reasoning, but that didn't mean they complied. Ron even had a stroke of genius when he told her that doing the summer homework in August was better to prepare their minds for going back to school. Hermione conceded the point, but, vexed, she didn't talk to him for a few days afterwards.

Mid-June, Remus Lupin and Sirius Black received a letter through an anonymous owl. They turned it upside down before looking at themselves. Few people knew where they lived, and fewer knew they lived together – like fallen angels huddling together against the angry world. Some wizards still didn't believe in Sirius' innocence, and he needed time to come about. He was also somewhat dependent, mentally and physically, not having lived properly for ten years. Remus helped him to the best of his abilities. Being cousin to the ex-convict, Tonks came a few times as well, telling stories about her most recent clumsy happenstances, which made them smile.

The two men tore the envelope and read the short message.

If you want to see Harry Potter, be at the Leaky Cauldron at 8pm, next Saturday.

They looked at each other and nodded despite the strangeness of the missive. Of course, they would be there!

Hogsmeade train station, June 20th

The school had finished with the customary feast, and Dumbledore announced the results. Gryffindor had won the Quidditch Cup, but had been outsmarted by Ravenclaw for the House Cup. For the Quidditch Cup, the second, third, and fourth places were taken by Slytherin, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff respectively, while the House Cup race saw Gryffindor and Hufflepuff tied at the rear.

At 11 sharp, the Hogwarts Express whistled a last time and left Hogsmeade, heading for London. Harry, Tracey, Ron, and Hermione were, as usual, sharing a compartment. Several minutes into the journey, Tracey tried to lie down, intending to take a nap using her clothes-filled schoolbag as pillow, but she stopped and sat up, frowning.

“What is it?” asked Harry.

“I don’t know.” she answered, rummaging through her bag’s content. “I swear I filled it with clothes, but there’s something hard in it, and... here it is!” she exclaimed, extracting a thick envelope from the bag.

She paused, and blushed suddenly. When dragging the envelope out, she hadn’t taken care of the clothes in the way, and a pair of blue knickers were dangling from the corner of the envelope. Before anyone could say anything, she stowed them back in her bag. It seemed that it was just in time, as the door opened and a haughty-looking Draco Malfoy looked down at them.

“So, the mudblood compartment still sticks together?”

“It seems the purebloods don’t.” said Harry, not even lifting his gaze and referring to the lack of support behind the blond boy.

“What do you want, Slytherin?” Ron asked Malfoy, the House name rolling on his tongue like an insult. He stood up. Even at twelve, Ronald Weasley was already tall, if not stocky, and he loomed an inch or two over Malfoy.

“You’d better watch your mouth, weasel.” said the smirking blond. “One of your friends is still one of us.”

He left before someone could retort. However, Harry had lifted his eyes toward Tracey and, seeing the budding fear there, he hugged her and a plan started to build in his mind.

Hermione hadn’t lost track of the previous discussion, though. “So, Tracey, what was that envelope about?” she asked.

The Slytherin girl looked at the brown envelope on her lap and remembered who gave it to her, so long ago.

Her great-grandmother, just before giving her life to defend her family.

Her family...

Tracey cried, shedding the tears she had held back for such a long time. She hugged the envelope at the same time, searching for a support in her distress. When she felt two arms hugging her, quickly followed by two other pairs, she remembered that she had friends, now. During the months, she hadn’t been given much time to grieve, as the first thing she confided to – the diary – took her free will away.

After several minutes, her tears had subsided enough for her to talk. “It’s... from my great-grandmother.”

The others knew how and why said ancestor died, and nodded in understanding.

Tracey stifled her tears and opened the envelope. Inside rested several parchments, but the first thing falling out was a key. A Gringotts key.

“I think your great-grandmother wanted to give you more than an envelope.” Harry deadpanned.

Tracey nodded and started to look at the papers. It contained a letter from her ancestor telling her about the pride she had felt when she had known she was magical. Said letter also stated that, given that she was the only magical descendant she had, she would inherit everything when time would come. Thinking about the circumstances around the gift brought tears to Tracey again and she paused to eat a Chocolate Frog, courtesy of Ron. Magical chocolate always lifted magical people moods.

She perused the other papers, but they were only legal documents about her inheritance. The two last ones brought a gasp, though. The first was titled "Family tree of Mathilda Morgana Prince, self-updating - subset copy of the official Prince family tree" and showed almost everyone in a greyish colour, meaning they were dead. Tears threatening to flow again, she turned to the last parchment, and stared at it in shock.

“What is it?” asked Harry.

When she didn't answer, he looked over her shoulder and gaped. “No wonder you're in Slytherin, then.” he muttered, owning himself an elbow in the ribs. “Ow!”

“What is it?” asked Hermione.

Tracey repeated the few words written on the sheet. "Surviving Wizarding Elements of the Most Noble House of Prince, with links to Tracey Davis" was the title and, once again, its subtitle indicated it was a self-updating copy of a subset of the official family tree, this time specifying that said tree was held in the Prince family vault.

There were only two names on the sheet: Tracey herself, and someone she never thought she would be first cousin to, even twice removed.

Severus Snape.

Meanwhile, in Hogwarts Headmaster's office...

The professors were sitting around a table conjured for the meeting, and the room had been enlarged a bit, in order to accommodate everyone.

"Thank you for being here." started Dumbledore. "It has been a year rich in events, but the school is, thankfully, still standing. I remember a time were the Marauders would-"

A not-so-discrete cough emanating from his esteemed Potion Master brought the old man in the present, and the end-of-year meeting started. It lasted two hours, and Dumbledore was quite glad, at the end, to know that all teachers wanted to return for the following year.

Leaving the Heads of House with the Headmaster, the other teachers departed, and Dumbledore removed his half-moon spectacles to rub the bridge of his nose.

"I'm sorry to bring the topic again," he started, putting his glasses back on his nose, "but I wanted to discuss about Harry Potter before convening the whole Order. You know how fragile Sirius still is."

"What about Potter?" asked Snape. "You didn't find him, did you?"

"No, I did not, Severus, but I have received additional data over the months, thanks to Alastor's discreet investigation."

The four Heads displayed the same expectant expression, and Dumbledore chuckled about it before turning serious again. "Our friend went to explore some place in France called Beausoleil, and followed a trail to Rome, from where our quarry seemed to have vanished again."

"How sure are you that the boy went there?" asked Flitwick.

“I’m not really sure, but Vernon Dursley, his muggle uncle, has been seen in both towns. Well, he wasn’t alone in Rome.” he finished, remembering only now about the other man.

“What do you mean?”

“He was with another muggle man, whose only distinctive feature was a folded sleeve. Alastor didn’t get anything else.”

“Why did you want to discuss about it with us, then?” the diminutive man asked again.

“It is just about how we should react if we find him this summer. Would he want to join us?”

“Why don’t you ask this to your friend?” asked McGonagall.

“What do you mean, Minerva?”

“That Jerry Honest who you said was the one behind the messages dropped on your desk.”

“It’s Homest.” Flitwick interjected, but the two others didn’t care.

“I can’t reach him. The man is as elusive as a gust of wind in the open seas.” answered Dumbledore, rubbing his nose again. In the process, he noticed something quite unusual.

Snape was livid.

“What is it, Severus?” he asked, noticing only now that he had been silent for quite a time.

The Potion Master turned his head toward him, so slowly that it was frightening. “Albus,” he spoke in a bland voice, “what if we were wrong from the start? What if we have been masterfully fooled?”

“What is it, my dear boy? What do you mean?”

The others knew that something wasn't right. The pale man always scowled or had at least a minimal reaction when Dumbledore called him "my dear boy" but he didn't react then.

"The folded sleeve... Albus, was it the left?"

The aged Headmaster frowned, recovering the appropriate memory before nodding.

"We are doomed." muttered Snape, lowering his head.

"Care to explain?" asked Flitwick.

The Potion Master looked up. "What are the odds that Harold Thomson's father has the same arm missing?"

The implication of the question made them gape.

Snape nodded. "That's what I thought. I should have said "the man posing as Thomson's father." Being Harry Potter would be another thing to add to the boy's oddity."

"And it would explain many things." said Flitwick, nodding.

"They could be mere friends." Sprout said in a strangled voice.

"Or not." Snape insisted. "Now, the only thing that's missing is the face. The annoying boy doesn't have the telltale scar or his parents' features. I know he isn't under any kind of concealment spell, and..."

"How do you know?" asked McGonagall, while Sprout was looking left and right, paling considerably.

"I did cast a Finite Incantatem on him, once. For some incongruous reason, I was sure he was... someone else..." he finished, registering Sprout's attitude. "What is it, Pomona?"

The addressee jumped violently, and looked around fearfully. She had the deer-in-the-headlights kind of gaze.

“I can’t tell.” she said.

“What can’t you tell us?” asked Flitwick, unaware that his question was an unanswerable one.

Sprout looked at them, unsure of herself. Her sense of loyalty was fighting a losing battle against itself, before bending toward the Headmaster’s side. After all, if everything was true, the boy had lied to her.

“Harry is a Metamorphmagus.” she said in a trembling voice.

It was as if another bomb had been dropped. Nobody said anything for a long time.

The first to react was Flitwick. “Excuse me, Pomona, are you talking about Harry Potter?”

“No. Yes. Oh, I don’t know! I meant Harold. After all, his friends call him Harry. He told me that he discovered his ability during Christmas break.”

“His friends call him Harry?” asked Snape in concern. “Do you think that, if Thomson is Potter, they could know about it?”

“We are making many suppositions, there.” Dumbledore interrupted, looking at his clock. “There is no way to answer these questions, unless we ask them directly.”

“Ask them?” they enquired.

“Yes. Ask them.” he said, standing up and grabbing the Floo powder pot. “Ready for a trip in London?”

While they were standing up, preparing for the trip, McGonagall stopped suddenly.

“What?” asked Sprout, who had almost collided with the stern woman.

“Thinking about Mister Thomson’s friends, I just remembered about something. Albus, is Miss Davis taken care of?”

“What do you mean?”

“She an orphan, now.”

Reminiscences of the previous Christmas break hit the aged man, and he expressed his feelings. “Shit.”

That got him raised eyebrows from the four teachers, and McGonagall charged again. “Who’s going to take care of her? Isn’t it the school’s job?”

Dumbledore thought about it for several seconds, before looking at Snape with an amused glimmer in his eyes.

“No.” said the Potion Master.

“Severus...”

“No way. I chose not to have kids for a good reason.”

“It will only be temporary...”

“The only reason I could take a child in would be if said child was of my blood. And I know there’s no chance of that.”

“She’s from your House...”

“I don’t care!”

Snape was getting incensed. He did not want a child to mess with his properly ordered life, and that was final.

Dumbledore sensed the darkening mood and decided to find somebody else to take care of the girl, eventually. In the meantime, the group of five teachers prepared themselves for the trip to King's Cross station, via the Leaky Cauldron Floo access. On the Hogwarts Express...

Harry and his friends took a long time exploring the train, saying their goodbyes to friends on the way and swapping addresses. Once back in their compartment, there were already nearing London, and prepared themselves to appear normal in the muggle world once again. The four of them shrunk their luggage using their secondary wand, and were exiting the train when Harry felt a mind attack.

He recognized the aura around the attack, and wanted to play with the man, but Snape's presence and unannounced attack meant that something was amiss. He jumped back in the carriage, and Apparated out as soon as he found an empty compartment. Three seconds afterwards, a panting Snape was checking every compartment in the carriage and would have continued with the whole train if the Headmaster hadn't called him back on the platform. Still in the gaseous reality, Harry followed, turning into Jerry Homest on the way. If he had to be visible again, at least it wouldn't be under a student's appearance.

Tuning the arguing voices in, he found out that Tracey had shown the last parchment from her legacy to Dumbledore and that Snape wasn't that glad to take care of her. Harry mentally cheered Tracey. After all, she was able to take care of herself, and she could always call upon him if anything went wrong. Switzerland wasn't that far from here, and he would visit her from time to time anyway.

Little did he know that he wasn't going to spend his holidays there.

Harry also understood Snape's point of view, though. The man had always met ungrateful children and it was a part of his bitterness. The intangible boy smiled. It would be an interesting summer.

Even through unobtrusive Legilimency performed by Snape while Dumbledore asked innocent questions, the teachers didn't find

anything the three friends could know relating to Harry Potter, and they let Ron and Hermione go. Tracey was going to stay with Snape, and Harry knew that her mental protections were good enough to hold against him. Especially with her sapphire pendant.
The Leaky Cauldron, an hour later...

“Are you sure he will come?” asked the gaunt man.

“For the twenty-seventh time, Sirius, I don’t know!” said Remus, annoyance starting to show through. “We did as was asked, and we can only hope it wasn’t a trap or something. I told you...”

“Yes, yes. You wanted to warn Dumbledore and the whole Order.”

“And you told me there was a reason Harry had never been found.”

“Exactly.”

“And that if he was able to prevent the most powerful sorcerer in the world to find him, he would be the perfect Marauder.”

“Precisely.”

A rare smile tentatively graced Sirius’ lips at the mention of the Marauders, but disappeared when a bespectacled man with auburn hair and green eyes sat at their table, bringing three mugs of butterbeer to replace their empty ones.

“It’s nice to see you, gentlemen.” Harry said.

It took several seconds for them to react. “Who are you?” asked Remus, his hand on his wand.

Harry looked at him. “You can call me Henry Evans, but my name doesn’t have any meaning.” he answered, and the werewolf had a sudden reminiscence of a proud moustache. His grip on his wand intensified.

“Evans?” asked Sirius, oblivious to the byplay. “Are you a relative of Lily Evans? You look like her.”

Harry smiled. “I aim to please.” he merely said, before turning to Remus. “Why did you call the cavalry?”

Remus forgot about his attack plan and looked at him. “What do you mean?”

“Tonks is under an invisibility cloak near the muggle exit and Moody is disillusioned near Diagon Alley exit.” he answered, using the names of persons, items, and spell effects he had extracted from Tonks’ memory. Moody’s mind was sufficiently protected to detect an intrusion and, knowing that the man was paranoid, he didn’t want him to suddenly cast spells left and right in the crowded pub.

Remus was paling. “We didn’t call them.” he said, before frowning. “It must be Dumbledore. He has been very... upset, recently.” He looked up and noticed that he had been talking about Dumbledore in relation to Tonks and Moody to a complete stranger, possibly exposing the Order.

“Relax.” said Harry. “I already know about your links with the roasted chickens.”

The two men looked at him with wide eyes, before erupting in peels of laughter. Harry took a sip of butterbeer, looking smug, and the expression moved something in Remus’ memory. The werewolf looked at him intently but failed to pinpoint why he was looking so familiar.

“Well... I have to go, gentlemen. Do you want to see... the sights?” he asked, and the two of them, understanding the underlying meaning, nodded eagerly.

“We will have to dispose of your guards, though. Unless you want them with you...”

“What do you mean by disposing?” asked Sirius.

“I just mean to leave them without them knowing where we go.”

“It will be quite hard with Mad-Eye.”

“I have my ways.” Harry merely answered, smiling.

“I don’t know about Tonks.” Remus said. “I know I can trust her, she’s like...” he stopped suddenly, blushing.

“Yes?” asked Sirius. “Finish your sentence, Remus!”

“Oh, come on!”

“Tell us you like her!”

“Shh! She will hear you.”

Harry looked at the bantering adults in front of him. In a way, they had recovered their youth, and it seemed to do wonders for both of them. After all, Sirius had spent a third of his life in prison, and Remus, being a penniless and unemployed werewolf, wasn’t faring much better. Harry shuddered, before getting back to the topic at hand. “She will come later, Remus. I’m sure that Harry will be delighted in seeing your girlfriend, but not right now.”

Remus looked down, before nodding.

“If you will?” asked Harry, extending his hands, palms up.

“What?” they asked.

“Give me your hands.”

They did, and vanished from the pub to land in Sirius’ sitting room. Harry had browsed the two men minds while they were waiting in the Leaky Cauldron, and had extracted the location of this room as it was a place where both men were comfortable.

“Wait a moment.” he said, before exiting the room. Three seconds later, a young boy entered the room. A young boy with the same brilliant green eyes as his mother and with the same black hair sticking in the back that the two men had seen in his father. A young boy with a very recognizable scar. Harry Potter.

Seeing their gobsmacked expressions, he smiled. “What? Afraid I might disappear?” he asked.

“Are you even real?” asked Remus, standing and approaching, closely followed by Sirius. “It has been so long...”

“So long...” echoed Sirius, although his voice had a haunted undertone to it. “I’m sorry, Prongslet.” he said, falling to his knees in front of the boy and embracing him in a bear-like fashion.

“Sorry?” asked Harry, who was only able to talk thanks to his suddenly-increased skin toughness.

“I’m sorry for having gone mad, seeking Peter instead of taking care of you like I should have done, given that you’re my godson. It landed you with muggles, and I... I...”

“Don’t worry, now.” Harry said, trying to comfort the older man. “The muggles aren’t that bad.”

After a moment, they separated, and Harry looked at him. “Prongslet?”

That started a one-sided discussion, with the two men recounting their life and his parents’ life until James and Lily got killed. Harry knew a large part of it, but Sirius and Remus knew more personal details, and even some secrets. He learnt that the group of friends comprising his father, Sirius, Remus, and Peter Pettigrew, had been called the Marauders, had often wreaked havoc in school, and that most of them were Animagus, earning them nicknames. In fact, he already knew that Remus was a werewolf and that Pettigrew was a rat.

From his side, he recounted some stories of his youth, letting his secrets on the side for the moment. Judging by the state of their mind, any Legilimens could read from them, and he didn't want to risk a leak.

Afterwards, Remus looked at the door inquiringly. "Henry?" he called.

"He's not there." said Harry. "He left after bringing me here."

"Why? I wanted to thank him."

"Don't worry, you'll meet him again." Harry said with a smirk.

At that moment, the fireplace burst into life, and a bearded face appeared in it. "Sirius! Remus!" Dumbledore called, before noticing that they were, in fact, right in front of him. With a guest.

"Oops." said Harry. "I'd better go."

"Harry?" asked Dumbledore in disbelief, before extracting his head.

The three persons there knew what was going to happen and Harry bolted out with a quick "Later!"

The two Marauders looked at each other before darting after him, but Harry wasn't in sight when they exited the room. At the same time, Dumbledore exited the fireplace, brushing the soot from his beard with his left hand while his right held his wand. Right behind him came Moody and Tonks.

"Where is he?" they asked Remus, who only shrugged, nodding at Sirius.

Sirius had turned into his Animagus form, a large black dog, and was sniffing the floor, but the trail didn't go anywhere and he transformed back, shaking his head. "He's not here anymore. Must have used a portkey."

Harry was actually there, but in the gaseous reality. After a while, noticing that Dumbledore wasn't going to harm the two men, he left them to their devices, promising himself he'd return later. After all, he had a family to see.

The day before...

The man looked at his employee, who had become his friend during their year-long work together. He had learnt to rely on him and gave him more and more responsibilities. He knew that the man was able to shoulder even more, but, short of giving him his own seat, he couldn't give him that. Until now. He had called for a meeting between the two of them and had told him the good news.

"Japan?" asked the man incredulously.

"Yes, Ben. You know that our Director is very satisfied with your work, but there's no place available in the currently hierarchy, here. You can wait a few years, staying where you are now until one of us changes job, or you can grasp that opportunity of our bank opening a new branch there. The man who was designated for the job unfortunately died a week ago. We are searching for a replacement, and your name came immediately."

"Still... Japan..."

"I know it's far, and I know it's sudden. I tell you what: take the documents with you, discuss about the offer with your family, and we'll talk about it after the week-end, alright? The new branch isn't opening until July."

"Alright."

And the man known as Benjamin Calder – but whose real identity was Vernon Dursley – left the office, heading home. When he told his family about the news, they had mixed reaction, of course, but all of them had travelled through several countries already, and moving wasn't prohibitive. They knew they had to wait for Harry, though. Only he could smooth the whole issue. Only he could make them learn a

new language in five minutes by only using magic and a couple of aspirin tablets.

When Harry Apparated home, that Saturday evening, he was the target of a group hug where his siblings weren't the only participants. Except for the short break at Christmas, which he had spent mostly with his friends, they hadn't seen him in almost a year. His brother was the most enthusiastic, itching to demonstrate his skill in robotics again and to show him his brand new collection of science-fiction novels.

After everyone exchanged small talk, Vernon decided it was time.

"Harry," he started, "I have something to say and a request to make."

The man was sounding nervous, which wasn't his natural state, so Harry became serious and nodded, indicating his full attention.

"I have been promoted, to head of the local branch, in Tokyo."

It was good news, and Harry had started to smile, but when the town name was given, it provoked a raised eyebrow. His mind clicked. "You want me to teach you Japanese." It wasn't a question. And he hadn't had to browse the man's mind to understand that.

Vernon smiled. "It would be easier." He then turned serious again. "What do you think, Harry? I told my boss that my acceptance had a condition to it, and that condition is you."

"Why?"

"Do you want to go?"

Harry thought about it. A new home...

"If everybody is ready, I am, too." he said. He didn't say that he had fewer memories of their current house than the other members of the family, but they knew it as well as he did.

“Excellent!” said Vernon, standing up. “I’m going to phone Kurt.”

His wife held his arm as he was going to dart from the room. “It’s Saturday evening, dear. Unless you want to invite them tomorrow, there’s no need to disturb them.” she said, before pausing, and her eyes acquired an amused glint. “I’m making duck’s breast with pears.”

Vernon understood the meaning. “I love you.” he said, and walked out.

“So,” started Harry, “is everyone coming?”

“We asked everybody.” replied Petunia. “The children said they would miss their friends, but that it was alright nonetheless. Alison has returned to the States a long time ago, and only visits from time to time. She told us that distance didn’t count, so it wouldn’t be any difference for her. Genevieve has her job here, so she stays. She said she was now more relaxed in her work, and that she’ll take over the house when we’ll leave. Victoria and George are coming.” she continued, referring to Ulrike and Jorg, “George is, like Jason, eager to find more about Japanese computers. And Mustafa doesn’t come. Tell him!” she finished, addressing the old Turk with a smile.

The man blushed. ‘What does that mean?’ thought Harry.

“I... well... there is that fellow worker... and she’s almost my age.” He gulped, and sighed. “We are getting married.”

Harry’s eyes were wide as saucers at that point, and he grinned widely. “Congratulations, Mustafa! When is the wedding?”

“Tomorrow.” he answered. “We were waiting for you, since you are the one who brought me here.”

“Thank you.” Harry said, before thinking about something. “Does that mean you will stay here?”

“Not exactly. Fatima, my fiancée, has a cute house near the stables, and we’ll establish ourselves there.”

“It’s nice to see you settled like that, Mustafa. Congratulations, again.”

There was a short pause, and Petunia looked at her watch before standing. “Genevieve won’t be long, I think. If everyone is ready to eat, I cooked for a battalion.”

“Oy! Food!” exclaimed Harry, mimicking Ron’s eagerness toward anything edible, and, despite not making the immediate connection to the red-haired wizard, everybody laughed.

During the meal, the discussion rolled on miscellaneous topics, most of them related to the future relocation to Japan. At some point, Harry congratulated Genevieve for her work with Charpak, and she smiled. That raised another topic.

“Harry?” she asked. “You remember when you had your... incident?”

The boy nodded.

“We caught particles from you which looked like neutrinos.” she continued. “Our department has a project for a large-scale neutrino detector, but they would like to catch only those coming from outer space.”

“The cosmic rays?” James piped in.

Noticing Genevieve’s surprised look, the young boy shrugged. “What? I read the Fantastic Four, you know? They fly in space and get showered by cosmic rays, and when they go back home, they are super heroes, and-”

“Jason!” exclaimed Petunia, addressing the exuberant boy. “Stop bothering Genevieve with your stories of super heroes.”

James looked down and meekly said “Yes, mum.”

“I don’t happen to agree with the super heroes part,” started Genevieve in a low voice, “but you’re almost right about the cosmic rays.”

Seeing the boy’s startled face, she smiled. “The cosmic rays we want to catch don’t interact with people’s structure in that way.”

During the exchange, Harry had been thinking about Genevieve’s problem and a solution was forming in his mind. “When we move through things,” he started slowly, “there are places we can’t get to, or through, because they are protected. I suppose... it could be possible to build a tubular field with such properties. Oriented towards space, it would block outside interference. And it is invisible and unobtrusive. Anything else can go through.”

Looking up, he saw Genevieve’s eager look and smiled. “I don’t know much about these, though. I mean... I don’t know more. I don’t know how they are made, particularly. It’s perhaps not even feasible. I’ll ask Hermione.”

“Who’s Hermione?” she asked.

“One of my closest friends whom you saw during Christmas break, and a true bookworm. I’m not sure I should tell her about your research, though.”

“Why?”

“I don’t really want her to barge in your lab, asking questions about everything and such. She would disturb you.”

Genevieve thought about it. Since her colleague had disappeared, she hadn’t spoken much to other people outside Harry’s extended family, and the prospect of having an eager kid to help her was surprisingly appealing. Scientifically, she was stuck where she was at the moment, waiting for her boss to get his Nobel Prize and waiting for the necessary grants to build the gigantic underground pool needed for neutrino detection. So, there was no restriction on which

topic she studied or who she was working with. She looked back up. "I don't mind," she said, firmly, and Harry knew he was going to send an owl (or rather, a falcon) soon.

The meal finished in a joyous atmosphere, and James darted to his room to bring back a few comics about the Fantastic Four to show how they received the cosmic rays. That got Harry thinking. He had already Apparated in high atmosphere, but never tried in space.

Was it even possible?

Would he find something there? Life, even?

He smiled. Wasn't Cosmic Biology a topic studied by muggles? At the same time...

Incidentally, Cosmic Biology was also the label of the tall building along which two men were walking briskly, but they didn't care about their surroundings. The first was an old man, with white hair in a crew-cut, who wore numerous scars gotten during several wars, some official and some... not. He was clad in a perfectly tailored vest on which one didn't need much help to imagine medals. The other was younger, taller, and bespectacled, and had trouble following the soldier's pace, even if he knew the way. The two men were taking their everyday path to work, to their office situated in the large complex which the civilians had dubbed "the Aquarium."

However, one of them shouldn't have been there. The old General had been with his wife on his yearly week-long vacation in his datcha on the Ural mountain range, but, barely three days into it, he had been called back. The other man didn't dare ask him about the interrupted vacation, the General's temper being a well-known quantity in the Directorates.

They didn't speak. Besides, the narrow walkway wasn't secured for the kind of information for which the General had been summoned, unlike the costly phone system which equipped the man's office and vacation house. Costly was also the ride from the nearest Red Army base to the Khodinka Airfield nearby. After all, the helicopter which

had been used for the trip wasn't the usual troops transport. It was a prototype version, which design mixed parts of the Kamov KA-118 and of the Westland Lynx Battlefield 800 project, the former being obtained by "friends" in the business, while the latter had been acquired through espionage. It was a pity they couldn't publish its design, because it was outstripping the mere 250mph of the Lynx by more than 70 percent. It would have blasted the americans' sacred and all-powerful market to bits.

That wonder of technology was the least thing in the General's mind today, though. The man, whom few knew the real name of, was called Tovarich Mikhailov by his subordinates. And he didn't have anyone to answer to. The other man, Boris Kholodiazny, was deputy chief of the Foreign Intelligence Directorate. The two men didn't like each other, but they respected each other's work. Today, however, that respect was strained to its breaking point. Nothing was said until they reached the private conference room, where the others were waiting for the General.

Kholodiazny wasn't even seated when the General addressed the room. "Why and how did the SVR manage to lose eight agents?"

The voice was sharp, and the tone was harsh. The General never had to add words like "I want to know..." and he never had to add "now." It was implicit.

And the group listened to Kholodiazny's retelling. The SVR agents had been found by a security team, the kind of which visited the teams on assignments when they stopped reporting. They didn't find two of them and presumed them dead, and the others weren't faring much better. The interrogated agents had reacted like mere civilians, not knowing anything about the SVR, the security team, or their mission.

And they didn't remember anything about the GRU.

The Russian Main Intelligence Directorate ("Glavnoe Razvedyvatel'noe Upravlenie" or GRU) had been an independant body collecting and managing intelligence in and out of the Soviet Union, and was continuing that job with Russia. After all, thanks to

Lenin stipulations, they were so completely independent that even the Russian government couldn't do anything about them.

As Intelligence manager, they centralized the information coming from several sources, and were able to find striking similarities in facts that were otherwise completely unrelated. That's how they noticed the CIA's sudden increase of measures around a particular family, and they had mimicked them, using SVR agents to monitor two particular locations. They hadn't managed to find anything yet, though, and the agents were now useless. The whole Foreign Intelligence Directorate was looking grim.

However, one of the men around the table, responsible for the Intelligence service which sought possible meaning of apparently meaningless isolated events, raised his hand. "We may have something of interest. A CIA agent in Geneva had reported a change in house decoration recently. It is no striking fact, but Geneva isn't that far from Rome, and the agent belonged to the team assigned to watch the house in France."

Tovarich Mikhailov raised an eyebrow. "Proceed." he said, and they all understood what it meant.

While they started to leave the room, the General, still standing, moved to peer through the tinted windows. "Boris." he called, preventing the tall man's hasty exit.

After checking that nobody else had stayed, he continued to talk, still look outside. "These useless agents need food and don't provide any service to the Soviet. And we can't hold inspiring funeral services while they live." The old General looked up. "It is a problem."

The other man paled at the implication but he knew better than questioning his chief's words and nodded, before leaving. The reference to the Soviet had been forgotten: the countries previously in the Union were just starting to reorganize themselves, and the General was known to live in the military grandeur of the past.

After sending the appropriate orders for the disposal of the former agents, he reflected about the whole situation. What was pushing the

General on such a meaningless track? It sure wasn't the intelligence provided by their CIA moles, since the CIA itself didn't seem to know why they spied on the places initially.

Did the General have external Intelligence?

To be continued in next chapter: A Way of Life...

Old Basilisk removed... check.

Evil diary safe... check.

Now that Sirius Black's released,

I hope the readers are pleased.

Chapter 16 – A Way of Life

posted October 1st, 2005

The wedding ceremony of Mustafa and Fatima was moving, and the newlyweds thanked everybody afterwards, before inviting them to the following dinner held in Fatima's house. Once the feast was going full swing, Harry, Vernon, and Jorg cornered Mustafa and informed him that a large sum had been added to his bank account. The old Turk tried to protest, but, thanks to the Swiss banks being open on Sundays, the transfer had already been made, and there was nothing he could do. That way, the two elderly lovebirds would be able to live peacefully together, and eventually tour the world, one of Fatima's dreams. Mustafa promised that, when that would happen, he would make a long stopover in Tokyo.

The following days were spent in frenzy, the whole family organizing the relocation to Japan. Harry took advantage of the fact that the Consulate General of Japan was located in their street to learn about the country, its culture, and its language. Learning, in that very case, meant finding a Japanese employee in the building, as refined as possible, and importing every non-personal memory related to Japan from his or her mind.

In his case, it was a she. Yasu Shizuka was a woman of 24, working in the documentation section, and, as her name suggested, she was quiet. When he arrived, asking for documentation on Tokyo, she smiled and gave him several leaflets wordlessly. It was for the better because, despite his newly-morphed Japanese features, he couldn't have held a conversation in the language, yet. Harry sat at a nearby table, looking like he was peering at the documentation intently while he perused her mind. Due to her job, Shizuka's mind was full of miscellaneous information about the country itself, and Harry, discovering the amount of information he was about to import, decided that he was going to get aspirin as quickly as possible. Thankfully, he had known that he was going to trifle with his mind, and had brought a whole tube with him. Taking a glass of water from a nearby fountain, he gulped down not one, not two, not even three, but four pills at the same time, grimacing at the taste.

He left the building afterwards, and walked home to explore the memories. And he then discovered that he had overlooked something. When one learned about culture or language from a person, one should choose that person of the same gender. Harry's mind was full of names, locations, and vocabulary, as well as culture-related memories, all related to girls and women, while he knew very few of the things specifically related to boys and men. When he recounted his day that evening, it earned him a wave of laughter from his family, and a blush like no other. He decided to repeat the operation the next day, selecting a male employee instead. However, Petunia, Ulrike, and the twins would happily benefit from his involuntary mishap.

Harry also discovered something of importance, which made the Dursleys glad that they had learnt bits of Chinese before. The Japanese language was not only different from occidental idioms, but it involved voice modulations they weren't used to. After having learnt the language, they tried to speak a few sentences, but it sounded awful. However, with their new memories, they knew what was wrong with the pronunciation, and they started to train themselves continually, switching to Japanese when at home.

However, despite the fact that copying that many memories was interesting for him and his family, Harry started developing a faint feeling of guilt. Ethical questions about the property of the mind started nagging at him, but, for the moment, he quenched his doubts with the sureness that his actions were either necessary or unobtrusive for their recipient.

Geneva International Airport, June 24th

The day of their departure was sunny, and they boarded the plane with mixed feelings. On the one hand, they were sad, saying their goodbyes to Genevieve and Mustafa, and missing their house already, while, on the other hand, they were all eager to explore the Country of the Rising Sun.

Harry was a bit apprehensive about British wizards possibly posing problems during their stop at London, but nothing happened and, after making sure that no troublesome aura was present, he enjoyed an early and quick dinner with his family.

He then excused himself for a few minutes and headed for the restrooms. He had a last thing to do before leaving England.

Once out of the public eye, he extracted a particular Unbreakable bottle from his pockets. A bottle containing a beetle and a few herbs. Making sure that he would be perceived mentally as his alter ego Jerry – he only had to change his fake identity – Harry connected to the Animagus' mind and almost laughed out loud at her indignation at being forced to eat fat grass.

“How are you faring, Rita?” he asked to the woman inhabiting the consciousness building.

She sneered, not a particularly beautiful expression. “I have seen better days.”

“I already told you why you are here and what to do to get out. Do you want to stay?”

She dropped the sneer and sighed. “I’m fed up with your little cell, Jerry. Do your worst.”

“I was sure you’d understand. You see, as much as I like messing with peoples’ minds, I don’t like forcing them into a whole personality change.”

She winced. “You don’t have to remind me the terms, you know. I agreed, so do it already.”

“Just making sure that you remember all of them.” he smirked and started to count on his fingers. “First of all, you are going to stop being a dirt-digging journalist, and will only report facts. Secondly, you are also going to propose your spying services to Dumbledore, permanently and free of charge, as a repayment for the slandering campaign against him. And thirdly, you’ll submit your articles to him before publishing.”

She flinched, but nodded. At least, she would be keeping her job and her Animagus powers. "What about the freedom of the press?" she asked in a last chance of him changing his mind.

He frowned. "I do agree with the concept, but it's your methods I don't agree with. You have been slandering left and right with no retribution, only delighting in seeing how miserable you could make people. And the Daily Prophet was too happy to print your success stories, however wrong they were. After all, with the Prophet the only "respectable" journal in Britain's magical world, it's not like we can speak about competition or contradiction, is it?"

She reluctantly shook her head and he continued. "In an ideal world, I wouldn't have to do that, you know. There would be several newspapers out there, selling their own version of stories, and people would have something to compare your words to." he stated, before frowning thoughtfully. "In an ideal world, there wouldn't be a dark lord lurking in the shadows, and we wouldn't have to hide the Basilisk from the public because of that." he added absently.

"The Basilisk?" she asked, her reporting manners coming back full force.

He nodded. "Yes. In this world full of pureblood bigots and corrupted officials, it wouldn't have been a good idea to close the school. It wouldn't have opened ever again and the children would have been left to their own devices, thus forbidding muggle-raised students from learning magic."

She quickly added the numbers and her mind eyes opened as wide as plates.

Harry caught the look and smirked. "Of course, you won't remember this conversation either. Even if you'll be an honest reporter from now on, I don't want to risk any Legilimens out there to get my secrets from your unprotected mind."

She started to squirm, but her eyes became glassy as Harry was rewiring her personality and removing a few blocks of memory. Several minutes afterwards, a large beetle took off from the now

opened bottle, transformed into a humbled Rita Skeeter, and Apparated northwards, toward Hogwarts and Dumbledore.

Harry grinned, and joined his family in the queue for the next flight.

They had been told that, for that particular flight, the plane would pass over the arctic seas, not far from the North Pole. Due to the earth's shape, which wasn't a perfect sphere, it was shorter that way. After peering through James' window, wondering about ice-covered seas and summer temperatures, Harry reflected about how knowledge of the Earth shape could help his long-distance Apparation jumps. His head quickly full of figures, he soon dropped the idea and decided to keep his trial-and-error approach until he was better in maths. He then joined most of the plane's passengers in their action, or lack thereof: they were napping.

They landed in Tokyo a dozen hours after taking off from Heathrow, and discovered that the sleep they had taken in the plane would be fruitful, because the next day's afternoon was just beginning, there.

One of Vernon's future employees, a smallish man named Takeshi Daisuke, was waiting for them. After his initial surprise of hearing each of the occidental family members speak Japanese with only a slight accent, he brought them to the minibus he had rented for them. While driving the vehicle around, briefly showing them where everything – their bank, the shops, and entertainment centres – was situated, Daisuke explained that he was "at their service" until the bank was open, five days later.

The first thing they did was to take possession of their keys to their new home – if it could be called "home." Space was scarce in downtown Tokyo, and they only got two apartments, with a little kitchen, a little bathroom, and two bedrooms in each. Each apartment was barely large enough for four of them to sleep and eat. Their guide explained that it was still a luxury to have such a place in there, and it was only thanks to the bank that the local branch's managing team and their families had the possibility of living there. As Vernon was going to head the branch, they had turned a blind eye toward the sheer number of people he had declared as "family." Officially, Vernon and Petunia were scheduled to sleep in the first apartment

with their daughters, while Harry and James would be sharing the other with Ulrike and Jorg.

Daisuke explained that they could still decide to settle in the suburbs, where the apartments were a bit larger and a tad less expensive. However, if he thought the occidental family was going to abandon the cramped place, he was wrong. The boy whom they called Harry told them something in another language, and they smiled widely.

They thanked Daisuke and he left, promising to return early the next day for a tour of the whole town. They then congregated in the first apartment and dropped their suitcases in a corner, before turning to Harry. The boy had already started jotting down ideas about a new apartment structure. Transfiguration and conjuring weren't his specialty, though, and he could only propose ideas to enlarge the area, with only vague suggestions about future walls and furniture. They decided to keep one of the apartments as it was, in case muggles were visiting. The second apartment was adjacent to the first, and Harry agreed that he could use magic to create at least a doorway between the two of them. The second apartment would then be completely remodelled, and its outside door magically bolted shut. After a couple of hours of controlled magic, Harry breathed a sigh of relief. Even if half of them would still sleep in the first apartment tonight, the second one had another structure, now.

Gone were the two drab bedrooms and kitchen. The rooms were still plain, but they were now larger. He had enlarged each of the bedrooms' wall-encased wardrobes to walk-in closet size, and the bedrooms themselves were now large enough to be separated into individual ones later. The four minuscule windows which had been dotting the wall of each bedroom were now large panes which would provide much-needed sunlight. Harry knew the spell enough, now, to limit the enlargement of the windows to the inside, preventing the telltale signs of magic to show out of their apartment.

The kitchen had also been enlarged and it now included a dining space large enough for all of them as well as possible guests. Harry couldn't disturb the plumbing and electrical system of the bathroom too much, though, and he only enlarged the walking space in it. However, even large as it was, the bathroom couldn't accommodate

the eight of them, and Harry decided to send Quicksilver with a message for Alison, asking her if she could spend a few days to help.

Unsurprisingly, Harry slept like a log afterwards.

The next day, Daisuke brought them on a tour to see and explore the place. He finished showing them where everything was, completing the previous day's brief tour. Then, they took the metro, went to Vernon's future office, and to the kid's future school as well, before visiting a few malls. There, while Vernon was leading Daisuke to show him the different shops, the two men discussing about the bank systems on their way, the others bought several things like clothes or basic furniture items that were missing from their now-enlarged apartment. Harry refrained from systematically modifying the salespersons' minds to lower prices, but he still influenced them in order to turn around while he shrunk the furniture and other equipments discreetly.

After taking a late meal, they repeated the process for electric appliances and electronic equipment. Jorg and James were positively frantic to discover the state-of-the-art computers and other electronic gadgets. Vernon looked at them, sighed, and led Daisuke out again. Harry would take care of shrinking the purchases again.

When they left the malls, they were loaded with one or two plastic bags each, filled with clothes, books, and small equipment, but Harry had enough shrunk equipment in his locket to fill a whole house.

Daisuke drove them around town some more, showing the theatres and other entertainment places. Some of these showed Noh pieces, a Japanese major theatrical form, about which they already had a few ideas thanks to Yasu Shizuka's memories. There were advertisements for concerts of Japanese pop and Enka music as well. And martial arts.

While the adults looked interested by their guide's description of Enka, Harry and James shared a conspiratorial look as the bus passed yet another martial art poster. Petunia and Ulrike were too engrossed by the discussion about traditional music to catch the boys' look, but Vernon wasn't.

“Not again.” he groaned, and the others looked at him.

“What?” asked Jorg who, while having caught the glance, didn’t have the slightest idea concerning what it was about.

“Those two,” started Vernon, pointing at the two boys, “have ideas that will earn them haematomas. Again.”

Harry and James were gaping at him, while the twins giggled, happy that the older boys got caught. Harry, for his part, couldn’t fathom how Vernon could have guessed this without reading his mind, but he had forgotten that the man’s job was to be in contact with people, and interpreting people’s reactions had always been Vernon’s forte.

However, the puppy-eyed look has always worked on adults, and the man sighed. “Very well. What is it?”

The two boys pointed to a nearby ad, where two persons clad in a kind of dark blue robes were swinging swords at each other. Neither of the persons involved in Harry’s learning of Japanese culture knew about this, and he asked the guide about it.

“It’s Kendo – the Way of the Sword.” he answered. “But I don’t know anything else about it.” As the traffic light was still red, he leaned toward the large poster. “Apparently, and until the Bon Festival, the All-Japan Kendo Federation is accepting new students for a summer term. Anyone can register during their usual courses at the Nippon Budokan. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays 5:20pm to 6:20pm.” he elaborated, before looking at them. “The time is soon and it’s not far from here. Interested?”

The similar smile of eagerness on the boys’ faces made him grin in return. “I guess it’s a yes.”

As he turned back to drive the vehicle forward, he missed the sour expression on Petunia and Vernon’s faces, while Jorg and Ulrike looked interested, and the twin girls were having one of their private silent conversations.

They arrived there early and took a drink at the Budo cafe terrace nearby, while their guide told them about the building's history. The Nippon Budokan was an octagon-shaped building designed to hold the 1964 Olympics judo competition and its dozen thousands spectators. Since then, it had always hosted martial arts exhibitions and tournaments as well as musical concerts, and the Japanese federations of several martial arts used it for their courses.

When they went there, they noticed the large group of people clad in the same protective outfit, starting their sword practise. Almost a hundred students were there, while roughly the same number of spectators was looking from the seating steps. The Kendo students seemed to be split in skill groups, as several students were just practising handling the sword while others were entranced in complex sets of moves, striking their opponent without holding back and yelling their Kiai at the same time.

On the side, a large desk, from which hung an "All-Japan Kendo Federation - registration" sign, welcomed the prospective students. Harry and James looked at their family a last time, and, seeing their acceptance, they shared a nod before advancing toward the desk.

They had to pass next to several groups in the way, and got spotted by two teenaged students in the next-to-lowest skill group. Ichiro Ryota and Kyo Isamu were training half-heartedly, like they always did, when they noticed the two occidental-looking boys. The "wide-eyed" boys looked like tourists, and were walking towards the registration desk, something which was unusual as tourists weren't allowed to join. The two students smirked the same way. Still sparring, they moved as inconspicuously as possible, positioning themselves in the boys' path. When the two youngsters passed by, they lunged toward them.

It had been thought as a mean manoeuvre to scare them. The two kendokas knew they couldn't land their blow or there would be hell to pay, but they acted as if they would. Ryota had acted first, aiming at Harry's head, while Isamu tried a side slashing move toward James' belly.

Nothing happened like expected, though.

Since the Basilisk attacks, Harry was always alert, and, having sensed the animosity from the two teens, the little wizard had increased his toughness. When they attacked, he slowed time and snatched the wooden sword from his attacker's weak grasp, before using it to parry Isamu's strike, slamming the mock katana he was holding on the other's in a downward strike. The whole move hadn't lasted more than a second, and the increased strength behind the parry provoked something unusual. At their level of skill, Isamu and Ryota weren't actually putting all their might behind strikes, and most of the swords used by students of their level were, likewise, simply made of light and hollowed bamboo. When Harry slammed both swords on the hard floor, they broke with an audible snap.

Harry's family had watched the whole happenstance, and they winced. What had Harry gone into, this time?

When the teacher for their group approached, the two kendokas removed their masks and started an explanation in quick Japanese, thinking that the two tourists didn't know the language. The sensei looked annoyed, but Harry spoke up suddenly, interrupting the teens' rant in Japanese.

"What they say is pure untruth, sensei. We didn't take their swords while they were resting. They attacked us, and I defended. It's not my fault that your swords are so fragile," he shrugged.

The three Japanese looked at him in wonder. The occidental-looking boy had understood the rapid speech perfectly and spoke in almost-faultless Japanese himself. Besides, the sensei knew the two teens and had already suspected that their rant had been a half-truth already. He hadn't suspected that they would attack unarmed and undefended boys, though.

The man angrily frowned at Ryota and Isamu. "You are dismissed from this class. In the five years you have been here, I have not seen you making any progress, and yet you try to scare honest people by attacking them? It's unacceptable of true kenshis," he stated, raising his hand to prevent further interruption. "Out with you!"

When the two teens headed out, he called them back. "And take your garbage with you." he said, pointing to the broken shafts.

Grumbling to themselves, they complied and headed back again. Harry sensed that leaving them with as much anger toward him and James wasn't a good thing in the long term. Especially as he wouldn't be there to protect his cousin during school. Needing to take care of his family, he decided to invade their mind and change their most recent memories. Those two would think that they chose to leave the class by themselves, any interference from Harry forgotten.

Harry was just returning to his mind when he noticed the sensei's anxious look.

"What is it?" he asked, using the most polite tone he could.

"I asked you if everything was alright."

"Oh. Sorry. I'm fine." he replied, before turning to James. "You?"

"I'm alright."

"Why were you there?" asked the man. "The visitors and tourists are expected to sit in the steps around the hall."

"We know." answered Harry. "We wanted to register for the class."

"Oh, I see. I gather you aren't a tourist, then?"

"You would be right. My guardian has obtained a job at heading a bank in downtown Tokyo."

"Alright, alright. I guess you will get the papers soon enough. Will you follow me?"

The man led them toward the desk and held a rapid chat with the annoyed-looking man there. The other man looked at them uninterestedly, but his eye lit up when the sensei told him about Harry's dispatching of the two disrespectful teens.

“Have you practised kendo before?” he asked Harry and James.

To the men’s surprise, both of them shook their head. While the other man took their names, the sensei looked at Harry shrewdly.

“I’ll let you observe the groups for today.” he said. “At the end of the lesson, I will test you both to assess your skill.”

The boys nodded, and returned to their parents to watch the proceedings with attention. Both of them started by looking at the first level group intently, but Harry quickly switched levels, ending by watching the higher groups. Both he and James were trying to learn the moves, not wanting to disappoint the teacher or their family. At the end of the hour, the second level sensei motioned them back in the hall, and had had two young students lend them their garb and swords. After donning the padded armour, Harry looked at the wooden sword and shook his head.

“What is it?” asked the sensei.

“I don’t want to break it.” answered Harry absently.

The sensei nodded gravely, before going to some students of the highest level. They looked surprised, but gave him two of their reinforced swords anyway. Their own sensei looked curious, and followed the other one to watch.

James put up a good fight, but lost his weapon two times in a row. “You’re quite good.” said the man encouragingly. “You already have the will behind the sword. A few weeks in the first group and you’ll be ready to come to mine.”

He switched swords, and motioned to Harry to come forward.

The boy did, and they began. Harry repeated several moves from the higher level, surprising his opponent a few times. The swords clashed into one another several times, and Harry’s nimbleness proved useful

as he was scoring a few blows himself. After two minutes, the other teacher nodded to himself and stopped them.

“Katashi-san,” he started, addressing the other sensei, “I would like to test this boy.”

His own students, most of them adults or late teens, looked surprised, but the addressed sensei bowed. “As you wish, Goken-san.” he said, before sitting back on his knees with the others.

Harry sensed that it wasn’t going to be easy, but decided to surprise the man. After all, unlike James, he couldn’t stay the whole year to learn, and wanted to skip unnecessary skill groups. Increasing his toughness again, he sent a part of his consciousness to grasp the man’s peripheral thoughts.

At Katashi’s signal, he didn’t move and waited for the man’s attack. Which came quickly, the man feinting to the left before striking on the right. Harry, however, sensed it even before it started and, ignoring the feint, he used his crude moves to block the real attack. The two swords clashed with a resounding sound, and Harry was thankful for his increased toughness or he would have dropped his sword at the shock.

The few onlookers gasped at this. Most of the students had left already, and the tourists had seen the official course finish and had departed as well. Harry’s family had followed their boys into the hall itself to see their performance. The other spectators were Katashi, the students of Goken’s group, as well as the student who had lent his garb to Harry. All of them gaped, but Harry ignored them, focused on the fight. His opponent didn’t stop attacking, and Harry blocked all his attacks, trying a few moves himself, but they got blocked as well. After a minute of unsuccessful sparring, they separated to breathe. Behind their masks, both of them smiled, acknowledging each other’s skill – or sheer luck.

The man then closed his eyes, seeming to concentrate on something, and Harry gasped. He had been sensing the man’s peripheral thoughts to guess from where the attacks were coming, but now, these thoughts had disappeared. Seeing that the man was still

immobile, he chanced a look at the man's mind itself and was stunned. It was empty!

Harry returned to his own mind, a feeling of dread developing. Through the man's helmet, he noticed the eyes opening, and prepared himself, grasping the sword tighter and slowing time around him. Once again, the man attacked relentlessly, and Harry parried him as well, something which seemed to surprise the man. However, his parries were different than the previous exchange. Instead of parrying the exact attack, he was quickly changing his moves to counter his adversary's.

Harry was quickly tiring, though, and his grasp over time relaxed. The flow of time around him was slowly returning to normalcy, and, after parrying yet another assault, he decided to send all his might behind a last attack, and swung the sword forcefully. It was parried, of course, but the strengths and speed of the two swords added themselves, causing an impossible strain on the reinforced wooden swords.

They cracked, the sound audible in the now-silent hall.

The man called Goken seemed to recover from a trance and looked at him curiously. "You said you never practised kendo before." he stated after removing his helmet.

Harry was exhausted, and removed his borrowed helmet with difficulty. Panting, he gave it back to its stunned owner. "It's the truth." he said, panting. "We only learnt Shaolin martial arts. Whatever moves I did, I copied from those I watched during the teaching period."

The man nodded, and looked at him thoughtfully, before taking a decision. He motioned Harry to follow him, and returned to where the highest level group had been training. "What's your name, again?" he asked while walking there.

"Harry, sir."

“Well, Harry,” he continued, taking a business card from his bag and giving it to him, “be there on Monday, 2pm, and we’ll see what we can do for you.”

“Thank you, sir.” Harry answered, before returning to his family to change out of the heavy garb. Looking at his departing back, Goken smiled. It has been a long time since he had had a worthy apprentice. Geneva, at the same time...

An angry and confused Carla Mohavez got out of the plane. During the previous week, she had explored every archive with her name on it, and had discovered several discrepancies between them and her memories. As a CIA agent, she knew about brainwashing techniques, and suspected she had been subjected to some advanced ones, as there was no mean for her to find out what was missing. Hypnosis hadn’t helped either, and she had convinced her supervisor to send her to Geneva on a fact-rediscovering mission.

Once in the town, she checked with the agent still there, and also found that his memory was unclear about some things, like why he had been waiting for a house to be painted with flowers to report.

Speaking of house, the couple who was inhabiting it, despite being influent managers of a modern art gallery, had been fined by the city council and the flowers had been washed out. They really didn’t care about the fine, because they got their publicity that way, and it was cheaper than hiring an advertisement company.

Agent Mohavez questioned them, but they didn’t know anything about... well, anything. It was difficult to interrogate people when you didn’t have the proper questions yourself. Reverting to a private investigator’s techniques, Mohavez probed the whole neighbourhood without success. Even the large house inhabited by a single scientist didn’t raise any suspicion.

While Agent Mohavez was grilling the Dursley’s house previous neighbours and current inhabitant, several persons, led by a man clad in black robes, were barging in that scientist’s previous domicile.

They didn't find anything either, because Genevieve had removed all her stuff.

"It's smaller." commented Snape. He had remembered his previous visit to Harold Thomson's apartment, and had just led several members of the Order of the Phoenix to the place.

"What do you mean?" asked McGonagall while Dumbledore was looking around.

Snape huffed. "It means that somebody had enlarged it for my visit. And I only found the brat and his muggle father. It means that they have support from some wizards, unless..."

"Unless?" prodded McGonagall.

"Unless the boy did it himself." he replied with an expressionless face.

While they were bantering, Moody was still in the entrance, peering through the few doors with his magical eye. "Nobody's there." he growled.

And it was true. Not only nobody was there, but nothing was there either. The apartment was completely bare, the furniture removed, the appliances cleaned. There wasn't even a single chair. The members of the Order of the Phoenix didn't know that the Dursleys had relocated from Geneva to Tokyo, taking some of their furniture with them. They didn't know that the usual inhabitant of the flat they were visiting had relocated into the Dursleys' previous home, likewise taking her furniture with her. But they quickly realized that they didn't even have a piece of personal property to put tracking charms on.

"Where do you think he is?" asked Dumbledore.

Despite knowing exactly who he was talking about, the others didn't answer.

London, at the same time...

Tracey was depressed.

With Ron and Hermione, she had refrained from laughing when Snape had discovered his link with her. The usually cold and collected man had stuttered like a school boy before being pushed to accept her by Dumbledore.

When she had left the station with him, the man had had the expression of someone forced to eat some concentrated lemon extract or a similarly bitter potion, but, by the time they arrived to the Leaky Cauldron, he was more thoughtful than annoyed. He had then decided, quite unilaterally, that she would stay at her parents' house, and that he would only visit from time to time. She would have been glad if he hadn't added that she wasn't allowed to get out.

"I don't want a little girl messing with my life." he had said at that moment, and she felt the man's bitterness about life in general, as well as something... more profound, but which was quickly hidden under a scowl.

The net result of all this was that she under house arrest in her own home, all outside doors locked using a strong locking charm, of which she didn't know the counter-spell. She had many happy memories in there, but the house was so empty, now, that she was falling into a depression. And when Snape showed himself, she was so angry at him that she refused his scarce propositions of getting out. She had been half-tempted to drag him in a muggle mall, just to see his reaction, but she was too tired to care.

Invariably, he then proposed a lesson in something he thought was useful for a Slytherin: Occlumency, or the art to shield one's mind. His way of teaching it was very different from Harry's though: he asked her to clear her mind, and attacked it relentlessly. After a few tries, he also discovered that her pendant was interfering with the teaching, and she reluctantly obeyed his order to remove it when he was "teaching." To his dismay, though, it didn't help very much. Her mind was very ordered, and he didn't discern its fake nature. And he didn't find anything about Harry Potter.

Tracey sighed, and shifted in the sofa. Was the man going to explore her mind all summer? If he did, would he be able to pass her protections, eventually?

To top it all, Harry had written that he was relocating to Japan, to the other side of the world! She didn't even know if he could sense her, now. Her last attempts at mentally contacting him had failed completely. Taking a quill and a parchment, she forced herself to write a message for him, before calling Wotan, her own falcon.

When she sent the bird through the attic window, she had the faint impression of throwing a bottle in an endless sea, and it depressed her even more.

Rostov, Russia, the next evening...

In a shady alley, an old man was walking, his senses in full alert. His white hair drew two thugs who thought that his advanced age was a sign of weakness, and they attacked him suddenly.

Bad idea.

After a scuffle involving a knife, a throat, and, a second later, a belly, the white-haired man passed the dead ruffians. "Amateurs." was his only epitaph.

His target finally came into view. The shabby pub didn't seem more reputable than the streets he had just passed, but he knew that, for his contact, it wasn't a difficulty.

Petr Ivashutin, also known as Tovarich Mikhailov or "the General" by his organization, entered the dingy room and immediately spotted the man. Said man always insisted to use a different place to meet, but it wasn't really a problem for the General. This time, it had been even easier since Rostov hosted an aircraft assembly plant, and Ivashutin had travelled there under the pretext of examining the officers related to intelligence and secrecy there. He had done so, of course, before coming here.

His contact looked different each time, also, but he knew better than to ask pointless questions. A vivid demonstration of power, many years ago, had made him trust the man completely.

“The snow falls on the onions towers.” said the man as the General sat down.

“Yet the fishes don’t jump off the shore.” replied the old man, answering one of their codes.

The other discreetly extracted a stick from his pocket – even if the General noticed it, it was hidden from the other patrons – and waved it in a certain way while speaking strange words, the same that he used in all of their previous meetings. And the effect was the same too: the sounds from the pub became muffled, and both men knew that nobody would hear them.

“My previous boss has come back.”

It got a frown from the General. His contact seldom spoke about his boss, and the last time he had, it was to say that he was dead. He told so to the other man, who smiled weakly.

“We all thought so, but he reappeared not long ago. I have several persons with him, but I sense their number dwindling, as the quality of the information they give me. One of them told me that the old lion is walking on his cub’s tracks again.”

“It may be.” stated the General. “Our teams watching the cub’s last places of residence got their brain washed.”

“Typical. I’m sure old Mad-Eye had a hand in it.”

The General looked at his contact inquiringly, but the other man didn’t elaborate. He never did. The General had information for him, though.

“Our infiltrated spies in our lifelong enemy’s agency have found a strange event. It was so meaningless that they overlooked it during their reporting, and it took only a line in the written document.”

“What is it?”

“The cub may very well be in Switzerland.” he replied, before thinking about it for a second. “Or have been.” he amended.

“Switzerland? But there’s no mag... I mean no school... whatever.” said the man, something which got a raised eyebrow from the General. No school in Switzerland? Unless it was a school for gifted people... gifted... like the man in front of him? He frowned.

“Obliviate.” said the man, concentrating on a short duration.

The General’s gaze went glassy for a second, and he shook his head afterwards. He always had this kind of absences when speaking to his contact and he still didn’t know why.

“Switzerland?” asked the other man, putting his mind back on track.

“Yes. The agency we spoke about sent an agent because another one reported an unusual event. Our mole, which we’ll call Irina, told us that the agent found inconsistencies between her own memories and her archived files.”

“And what did Irina find?” asked the other man eagerly.

“She just saw a few words before being shut out.” the General stated. “Harry Calder Dursley.”

The other man nodded, thinking about it. Calder? It sure was an unusual middle name. As none had more to say to the other, they finished their interview quickly. As soon as the General was away, the other man went to the restrooms, from where he Apparated back to Durmstrang.

Voldemort wasn’t known for his forgiveness, and Igor Karkaroff, who had betrayed several Death Eaters in order to escape his incarceration, eleven years ago, had much to plan if he wanted to stay alive.

Tokyo, Sunday...

It was the last week-end resembling holidays. Wednesday, Vernon would go to work, and, if the bank's preliminary studies were right, it was going to be several months of hectic work. Fortunately, thanks to Alison's quick answer, Petunia would have a large apartment to take care of, and she was a few minutes' walk away from her husband's office. The American girl had arrived at noon with Abigail Connelly, a witch friend who had learnt architecture the muggle way, and held that job in both worlds. The advantages were numerous, as the construction she made for muggles were stronger than usual, and the house she build for magical families were well-thought and furnished, not the secret passages-filled candle-lit rat holes one could still find in numerous wizarding settlements over Europe.

The two of them modelled the apartment quite tastefully, Abigail transfiguring bits of matter into sturdy walls and beautiful furniture while Alison did the same with linens and curtains. With Harry enlarging things, they also added guest bedrooms and bathrooms. It was really impressive. As the two witches were going to leave, Harry asked Abigail if she would agree to share his knowledge with him and she accepted. After frowning for several seconds, he thanked her and she left soon after, wondering why the boy had then darted to the kitchen to grab an aspirin.

As they were relaxing in the lounge's new furniture, Harry heard a tapping at a window, and opened it – the windows of skyscrapers were usually bolted-shut panes of glass, but Abigail had messed with them too, allowing the passage of their messaging birds while preventing anything else from going through.

It was an exhausted falcon that flew in. Recognizing Wotan, Tracey's messenger bird, Harry offered his arm as a perch before taking the message away. He tried to feed the tired bird a few slices of meat, but it fell asleep after eating only one. After depositing it in the apartment's zoo – the name that Abigail had given to the room he had asked for his pets – Harry opened Tracey's message and read it, his heart clenching more with each passed line.

My dear Harry,

I seriously hope you'll get that message. Since I learnt you left for Japan, I tried to contact you with my pendant, but couldn't seem to reach you. I hope it's not too far for Wotan.

Snape has put me under house arrest, in my own parents' home! You know how I like it. And he has locked all the doors. On the few times he's here, he browses my mind at his leisure. Your protections have held so far, but I don't know how long they will, and I'm not strong enough to strike back.

It's so depressing in here. Can you do your trip-thing for me? I do hope so.

Love,

Tracey

Harry then noticed something which had escaped his mind when he had opened the letter. There were spots on the parchment. Spots which diluted ink at some points. It meant only one thing and he trembled in anger, while a lone tear fell from his eye to join Tracey's on the parchment.

Without even looking at the persons around him, he said "I'll be back." and disappeared.

Thirty minutes later, he found himself in Tracey's house again, and discovered Snape enjoying his most recent sadistic past-time: delving into Tracey's mind. The man was sure that she was hiding something, but hadn't been able to find anything in her mind.

Until now.

In a last attempt to check her mind soundness, he had forced open the white building's door, and discovered the hidden shaft leading to the subterranean part of her mind. 'Ingenious.' he thought, before exploring there. The memories that were stored in the hidden space made him gasp, and he would have spent several hours exploring

them, if he hadn't felt the tendrils linking him to his own body start to strain.

'Damn.' he thought. He had been certain that the house was safe, but, given that somebody was attacking him, he wasn't so sure of himself, now. He left Tracey's mind in a hurry and arrived in his own. Everything seemed in order, but, when he entered his consciousness building, he found himself cursed from behind. 'Damn!' he repeated, but it had a desperate undertone in it.

He saw a man turning around his prone form until he was eye-to-eye with him. A tall and old man with a proud moustache, whom he recognised from Dumbledore's description. Jerry Homest, the troublesome meddler.

"Well, well, well." said Jerry. "It seems that Mister Snape is enjoying a sadistic experiment. May I know why?"

The Potion Master suddenly found his mouth in working order again, and he started to explain. "She's the only one knowing about Potter's whereabouts! He's in-"

"Yes, I know. Japan, huh? You rape the poor girl's mind repeatedly and that's your only excuse? If you had done your homework, you'd have known that she's not the only one retaining that particular bit of knowledge."

"You... you..." the supposed infallible Potion Master was at a loss for words.

"Exactly. I know where he is. I will even tell you more." Jerry said, transforming into Harry in front of the gobsmacked man's internal eye. "I happen to know where he is at all times."

Snape, with his spy upbringing, had a faint idea of where it would lead. No spy voluntarily told his enemy about his double identity unless it was before killing said enemy. He desperately fought against his ropes, but Harry added more with a mere gesture from his hand.

“You see, Snape, when a magically powerful boy discovers his powers early, and when no one is around to guide him, said powers can go in completely unforeseen directions.”

“I don’t-”

“You don’t understand. Let me explain. Harry Potter has been in control of his magic since he caused Voldemort’s demise – although we both know that it was a temporary one. What can ten years of self-study do to a mind?” he asked, rhetorically, and the man didn’t answer. “Especially as I have been travelling around the world, hiding my tracks from muggles’ equivalent to your Unspeakables all the time. I learnt a thing or two concerning the mind. One’s own as well as others’.”

“Still... how did you...”

Harry smiled. “How did I enter your mind? Your oh-so-well-protected mind? It’s not the first time I’ve been there, you know?”

“What?” Snape asked, his shock apparent.

Harry smirked and transformed into Dumbledore. In front of Snape’s confused look, he leaned toward him. “Did you really think that Dumbledore had pierced your protections? Did you really think that he would have taken on a mental fight with Voldemort? Dumbledore is powerful, and his peripheral Legilimency powers are good, but I don’t think he’s as good as you in deep mind research. He isn’t focused enough. Is that why people think that he’s crazy?” he asked, but continued, not waiting for an answer. “Besides, the old man couldn’t wake you, yet you woke Pansy, Daphne, and Millicent, who were suffering from the same thing as you.”

Snape could only look at him in shock. And he was ashamed to realize that the boy’s words were true.

“It’s close to the end, now.” said Harry, returning to his normal shape. “I have to go. You realize that I can’t leave you in that state?”

“What are you going to do, Potter?”

“I offer you a choice. You can choose to forget about what you saw in Tracey’s mind, only remembering that a distant relative from her muggle family took her for the summer.”

“Never! The information about Potter is too important. I mean... you have to go to the Headmaster!”

“I already went to him.” Harry said, smiling. “Under a different identity, though.”

“You must hide, Potter!”

“Why should I? I mean... I was well hidden, before you tripped through Tracey’s defences.”

Snape smirked. “Now that I’ve broken them, I’m sure anyone could waltz in there.”

“You want to bet on it? You’d lose. I helped her build these protections, and did Ron and Hermione too. We spent not even a week doing it, during Christmas break. I’m sure I can do better during the two months of summer that are left.”

Snape gaped, before controlling his mouth again. “You have to obey this, Potter! Dumbledore knows everything. You have to go to him. The Dark Lord is searching for you.”

Harry looked at him in surprise. That was new. “Why?” he demanded.

Snape shut his mouth with an audible snap. ‘Way to go!’ he scolded himself.

Harry smiled, though. “Not a bother. I’ll find it from your memories.”

The man’s eyes opened as saucers. For a short moment, he had forgotten the setting. The boy seemed in perfect control of his mind. Pushing against the ropes with all his might, Snape had the pleasure

to hear a few break, but Harry noticed as well, and added three more layers, effectively stopping any movement from the Potion Master.

“My other proposal,” he started, returning to the previous track, “is to wipe your mind entirely. You’d be no more than a drooling man with the mind of a newborn.” Seeing Snape’s utterly shocked expression, he chuckled. “What? Don’t like newborns? Very well, I give you the choice. How old would you like to be? Five? Nine? Choose a number between one to twelve. I know you like kids.” he finished with a smirk.

Snape couldn’t think clearly at that point. Looking at the boy, he sensed the hurt in his eyes, and knew that he would do it.

“Nooooooooo!” he yelled.

After a short pause, during which he considered his options, he looked up. “I don’t have the choice, do I?” he said with a defeated tone of voice.

“No. You should know that I’m not going to allow you to keep these memories. You can keep all the rest, though.”

Snape nodded. “Do it, then. And don’t botch things up.” he finished with his trademark sneer, although it was half-hearted.

Harry refrained from taunting the man more, and left him there, going to his memories. He started by removing his immediate memories, from his discovery of Tracey’s Occlumency defences to their recent discussion. He then changed the man’s memories of this summer, implanting other ones implying Tracey had been taken by distant relatives.

Snape maintained an interesting system to check his memory’s integrity, but, now that he was sure that Snape’s consciousness was held securely, Harry had some time on his hands to search memories about it. In fact, the system was very simple, because the Potion Master relied primarily on protection. It was simply a large memory slab containing a summation of each and every one of his other memories. An index of sort. As it was quite simple, Harry discovered

it quickly, and updated the data there so that the man wouldn't suspect that his mind had been tampered with.

Finally, after removing Tracey's address from the man's mind, he fetched Snape's own address and Apparated him there. As much as he wanted to, he didn't stay to parse through the man's more personal memories, as he had a friend to comfort.

Some things would have been different if he had stayed.

He returned to find Tracey in a state bordering panic, and it took him a long time to calm her, assuring her that Snape had left without any memories of her breached defences and of her link with him. He even made her laugh when he told her of the man's fear of children. After an innocent cuddling session in the sofa, during which they retold details from their respective start of summer vacations, they went to the kitchen to prepare something to eat. It was nearing midday, and Harry, still in the Japanese time frame, thought that it was dinnertime already.

When they finished the delicious spaghetti dish, they took a fruit and moved to the lounge again. Tracey was fidgeting, nibbling at her apple without really eating it.

Sensing that she wanted to say something, Harry gulped his banana mouthful and asked "What is it, Trace?"

She looked up, and seemed to take a decision. "Can you do something for me, Harry?"

"Anything." he said, and they both knew it was true.

"I want to see my parents. I mean..." she choked, and tears welled up in her eyes.

He took her in his arms again. "You want to see their graves." he said, and it wasn't a question.

She nodded, not trusting herself not to cry more.

“Alright.” he said. “We can go now, if you want.”

“Now? But Snape locked the doors.” she tried to object.

“Good.” he said, smiling a little. “You won’t have to fear the burglars, now. Besides, I prefer passing through walls than doors. Windows, also, they are quite enlightening.”

She understood that he was speaking about Apparation, and smiled back. “Let’s go, then.” she said, grasping his hand.

And they disappeared.

When dinnertime rolled around in London, Harry was beginning to be rather tired. It was 4am in Japan, and his body was suffering from exhaustion. Tracey was emotionally drained as well, and, after making plans for the days to come, they slept in the empty house.

The next day saw them up and refreshed just as the sun was rising. Harry hadn’t forgotten his appointment in Japan, and knew that they only got an hour before they would need to leave. However, by using magic, they quickly packed whatever stuff she would need for the whole summer in less than that. It gave Harry some more time to reinforce the locking charms on all outside apertures. After shrinking and pocketing the four suitcases, they left towards Japan. They wouldn’t have time for him to teach her Japanese right now, but they would do it later.

Harry quickly reintroduced Tracey to everyone, and found that, despite wanting to scold him for his long and unexplained absence, his family accepted the girl quite easily. They already knew that she had lost her family and suspected that something else had happened for Harry to fetch her in such a hurry. The twins went to her and dragger her to their room, while Harry enlarged her suitcases in the guest bedroom which was right next to his own.

He then asked a bit of money for the ride to Goken’s place, something Vernon gave him easily. The man knew that Harry didn’t like playing with others’ minds unnecessarily, but that he would do it

to escape paying for a cab ride. Harry thanked him and excused himself, before jumping out. After taking a taxi to the place written on the business card, he was still a couple of minutes early and walked toward the gate at an unhurried pace, observing said gate and the fence around the property.

The fence and gate were both made of painted metal, and looked quite sturdy. Spikes were aligned atop them, either to decorate, to discourage burglars, or both. The fence was plain, and Harry suddenly remarked that, unlike the other buildings around it, that one didn't have paint on it or posters pasted on it. The gate wasn't decorated either. There was just a metal plate holding the same symbols than his business card, adorned with an embossed dragon.

Goken's Dojo for the Gifted

Harry smiled, before examining the dragon. Harry was feeling observed, and he suddenly thought that the creature's embossed design probably allowed for an eyehole. He was ready to press the button next to the plate when the massive door silently opened by itself.

Harry advanced slowly, and the door closed behind him. He was in the entrance of what looked like a large estate. On his left and right were single-floor buildings, and another one, three floors high, was standing in the middle of the property. In front of him, and connecting the three edifices, was a courtyard, and somebody was in the middle of it, waiting for him. He advanced.

"You convinced me." Goken said, not moving, as Harry was approaching. "I'm willing to take you as apprentice."

"But... school..."

"Don't worry. I will write you a waiver and you won't have to go there until you finish your apprenticeship."

Harry thought about it. Finish the apprenticeship, huh? "How long it is?" he asked, still advancing toward the man.

“My last apprentice took five years.” Goken said, laughing at Harry’s dumbfounded expression. “But he started lower than you.”

“Who said I wanted to be apprenticed?” asked Harry, finally arriving in front of the man.

Goken’s eyes glittered with something akin to amusement. “You arrive at a kendo course having no experience in it, and manage to hold the national champion for two rounds, and yet you ask that question? No, gakusei. Humility might be a virtue for the old-fashioned occidental knight, but not for us.”

Harry bowed his head, and discovered something. On the ground between the two of them was a cushion, and two swords rested on it. He looked at his sensei inquiringly.

“These are laitos. Metal katanas, but unsharpened.” he explained. “You seem to dislike the bokken so much that you managed to break four of them last week.”

Seeing Harry’s lost expression, he elaborated. “The bokken is our wooden swords. The laitos are metal blades which can still be sharpened after a few uses. And the Shinken are live blades. Normally, students use the bokken to spar, because we don’t want unnecessary dents on the laitos, and especially on the Shinken.”

Harry nodded, and the man continued. “As I said, since you dislike the bokken, I will continue testing you with these.”

The boy looked around, but didn’t find anything to cover him with. “Sensei? I don’t have any armour. Neither do you, in fact.”

“Don’t worry about armour.” the man answered, his eyes glittering again, and Harry was briefly reminded of an old Headmaster. “For some reason, I suspect you won’t need one. And I’m quite proficient to heal whatever cuts you may get. As for myself, I hope to block all your strikes. If I fail, your advancing will be worth a few bruises.”

Harry nodded, and copied the man's moves as he took the sword. Both of them knelt in front of the cushion, opposite to each other. 'He's learning quickly.' thought Goken, before continuing the ritual. They took the swords and held them horizontally in front of them, before replacing them on the cushion and bowing. They then took the swords again, holding them vertically, before standing. Goken took the cushion and placed it on the steps leading to the main house.

Returning, he addressed Harry. "Ready?"

Harry breathed a few times, increasing his toughness, before nodding. He hoped that his actions relating to magic were as inconspicuous as possible, but, given the man's previous remark about armours, he didn't know if he was successful. The man paused in front of him, seeming to concentrate.

'Uh oh.' thought Harry. 'No more thoughts divination. I'm going to be sliced... eek!'

The man had lunged on him without warning, and the blade had sliced the air just as he dropped on the side, rolling on the floor and standing up, his heavy sword in hands. While trying to parry the man's moves in the normal time flow, he suddenly thought about something. Not having the cumbersome armour was actually an asset, as it allowed him to move more freely. This line of thought mingled with the fight because of a side strike from the man, which would have stunned him if he hadn't crouched suddenly.

They sparred like that for a moment, Harry merely avoiding the blows whenever possible. He waited for what would be an opportune moment, and seemed to find one when the man finished a large – and unsuccessful – slashing move. Accelerating the time, he jumped at the man and slashed left and right. Goken had been used to Harry's evading manoeuvres since the beginning of the fight, and the quicker-than-normal attack move surprised him. He just had time to move his head back to save his skin before he was able to attack again. Harry also knew that accelerated moves were tiring him too quickly, and reverted to the normal time flow to evade the man's attacks some more.

The fight continued in that way for several minutes, and, unconsciously, Harry started to adapt. The sensei was pushing him, and, using his Metamorphmagus abilities, he developed harder muscles and denser bones in a matter of minutes. He was starting to actually block the man's sword with his own more often, instead of evading it, and the clinking sound of steel against steel ringed in the otherwise empty courtyard. Harry's young frame wasn't used to such strain, though, and, despite tiring his opponent as well, his moves were starting to go slower and slower. His last attack being too slow, the man blocked it by slamming his sword on Harry's in a strong downward strike. Harry yelped when the shock ripped the katana from his fingers, and the sword clanked on the courtyard's ground.

Both of them were panting heavily, but a small smile started to grace Goken's features, quickly copied by Harry. While the situation wasn't quite funny, the man's mirth was contagious, and their laughter soon resounded in the still empty yard.

"I don't mean to pry, sensei, but what's so funny?" asked Harry, something which made the man's hilarity double.

When they were sufficiently calmed, Goken looked at him. "Given your level, Harry, I won't need to write you a waiver for school."

"What does that mean?"

"You'll certainly complete the training in a few weeks' time." he said, and his gaze acquired a faraway look for a few seconds, before he rose from his relaxing kneeling position, motioning for a stunned Harry to follow him.

Each of them recovered their swords, and Harry followed the man inside the large dwelling.

Inside, Harry removed his trainers and put on the appropriate sandals, before following his sensei to a room on his right.

He wouldn't come out of that room unchanged.
That evening...

The members of Harry's extended family, including Tracey, were waiting for his return. After all, nobody told them how long it would last. All of them supposed that Harry could find his way in the large city, and that he could defend himself against almost any kind of foe. However, after three hours of waiting, James had to go to the Budokan himself for his first Kendo lesson, and, as they suspected that the teacher who had invited Harry would be there, they decided to go there as a group. Only Ulrike chose to stay, volunteering to wait for Harry in the apartment in case the boy got there first.

In the Nippon Budokan, the usual groups were setting up, and James joined the first one, donning the padded armour and grabbing the wooden sword, both pieces of equipment having been bought by Vernon that very morning.

However, the senseis of the different groups weren't taking care of the groups yet, discussing animatedly in a corner. Only after a couple of minutes did they go back to their groups. The lesson started soon after, and James learnt how to stand and grasp his sword properly so that neither his person nor the sword would fall at the smallest blow. At the same time, the most attentive students from the seventh and last group had also noticed that their sensei had brought an extra case with him.

As the period progressed, the Dursleys didn't leave the tourist area, waiting for its end, and getting increasingly upset about Harry.

Several persons were moving on the padded floor, and no one remarked a lone figure detaching from the first group and joining the second. That person seemed to study the styles of each group for several minutes, before sparring with their sensei. When the armoured figure, undoubtedly a man, joined the fifth group, several students and onlookers started to notice that something was amiss. And when he joined the last group, there were whispers echoing in the room, either out of curiosity or anger.

The period finally ended, but each sensei positioned his students so that they were all sitting in a very large circle. A circle in the centre of

which the unknown man had been sitting since a few minutes ago. Goken headed for the registration desk and took a microphone from the people there.

“Thank you for studying so hard.” he said, addressing the students, before turning to the public. “This evening, we will have an unplanned exhibition of kenjutsu, for those of you who want to watch a good fight.”

He returned the microphone and, turning to the sitting man, he smirked. That was going to be fun.

Goken then went to the sword case he had brought and opened it, before bowing to its content. He then extracted two gleaming blades, to the students’ shock. Without warning, he threw one of them towards the man still sitting in the circle centre.

An audible gasp emanated from the whole hall, students and tourists alike. The man, however, stood and grasped the flying sword in the same fluid move, before waving it in a horizontal eight pattern a couple times, testing its balance.

A stunned silence fell on the hall and, a few seconds later, the sound of metal against metal resounded as the man blocked Goken’s charge.

When the mock fight ended, seven minutes later, the two opponents saluted the silent crowd before being applauded by everyone, tourists, students, and senseis alike. “Mock” fight was an understatement, though, as both of them seemed to have fought as if their lives depended on it, even using unarmed punches and kicks a few times. The two men removed their helmets and shook hands, and Goken returned to his students with the two swords while the unknown man walked toward the entrance, still clad in his full garb. Several tourists followed him, intent on getting pictures or autographs, and several students wished they could follow as well. The tourists returned soon after, however, crestfallen at having missed the great man. He must have had a key for a private side room, they thought, because they didn’t find him.

The ride home was silent, as the Dursleys' ears were still ringing from the metallic sounds of the fight. James was giddy, having witnessed a level of control on the blade which he hoped he would acquire some day. And Tracey was thoughtful. Earlier that afternoon, when the family had been wondering about the boy's location, she had tried to contact him mentally. Now that they were in the same country, she suspected that it was going to be easier, but she failed. However, her attentive eye had noticed something strange.

She had tried to contact him once, during the fight, and hadn't received an answer. However, the unknown man fighting in front of her had fumbled at the same time, barely getting himself impaled on sensei Goken's sword. She had reflected about it, and tried again when the two men were circling each other, but nothing happened. She sighed and, frowning, wondered where her friend could be, while thinking about impossible coincidences.

They found Harry at home, discussing amiably with Ulrike, and both of them said that he had been there for half an hour. To their questions, he told them that Goken had tested him again, before offering him private tutoring. He also said that, when the man had left for the Kendo course, he had worked an hour at the man's library, reading books about kendo history.

He looked interested when James retold the fight between the two men, and apologized when Tracey asked about his lack of response, invoking his concentration on the topic he was learning. To appease her, he invited her in his mind and showed her select parts of his afternoon.

Earlier that afternoon...

Harry gawked at the man in front of him. They had been on their knees, sipping tea, when the man had dropped the bomb, and Harry wasn't sure of how to react. After hiding all these years, his initial reaction was to Obliviate him, but he suspected that the man had hidden defences against that.

"What do you mean?"

“Come on, Harry-kun. You heard me. I know you have magical abilities that you can control. I said I wanted to offer you an apprenticeship, and it involves magical training.”

Sensing that Harry was still reluctant to advance further, he sighed and sat back. “Let me tell you more about our world. Since you are magical yourself, our Concealment rules are not applying, and I expect your culture to have the same rules to hide from the non-magical people.”

“Secrecy.” muttered Harry, nodding.

“That’s what I thought.” replied Goken. “Since both our cultures have rules like that, it was highly unlikely that we’d cross each other in the open. Well... first of all, Goken isn’t my name.” the man stated. “It’s my title, and means Fifth Sword of the Magical Empire of Japan. It involves locating and training recruits, and the building we are currently in is a magical dojo. It’s empty now, though. During the summer vacations, my cover switches to being sensei for accomplished non-magical students. But the ones I teach now won’t go much further.” he said, referring to last Friday’s kendo course.

Harry nodded, absorbing the knowledge, and understanding that the man was Dumbledore’s equivalent concerning magical studies.

“Only magical students reach higher abilities, and they are only trained here. When they are adult, they can decide to exploit their ability in international competitions or not. Those who do, though, are generally better than the kenshis of other countries. Did you know that the World Kendo Championship is dominated by Japan?”

“I didn’t know, but isn’t it like cheating?”

“Not quite. We actually know that some contestants from other countries use magic as well. Not overtly, of course. There were two very skilful English contenders at some point, but they disappeared without trace twelve years ago...”

“Sensei? You said that you were Fifth Sword. Does it imply that there are other Swords?”

“Yes. The First Sword is the one leading the whole Magical Empire, and it is His Majesty the Emperor.”

Harry searched his mind for a name and quickly found one, courtesy of his recently acquired culture. “Akihito?”

Goken looked confused, before nodding. “Yes. But we don’t name him. He is The Emperor. And, since the marriage of the ruling line with people of magical blood the line hadn’t died out. Fancy a bit of History?” he asked.

Harry acquiesced, and the man settled back before continuing.

“The discovery of the magical blood in Japan dates back 1200 years. At that time, Emperor Kammu was fighting the Emishi tribes of northern Honshu in vain. He then changed tactics and asked for help from the local clans. These clans’ leaders were awarded the newly-introduced title of Shogun. These clans copied the targeted tribes’ mounted archery tactics and overwhelmed them through sheer numbers. They then employed the men and either wed or raped the women.

“Nobody knew about it then, but the Emishi were the only native tribe with magical blood, and it made their descendants stronger than their counterparts. The clans’ leaders having gained the Shogun title invented the concept and title of samurai. Literally, it means "in close service to nobility" and it required self-sacrifices if one sullied his employer’s honour. The Emishi descendants were the main part of the samurai forces, and their fierceness in fight drew non-magical people, bringing a slow decline in the title’s reputation. 150 years ago, the magical samurais – the real ones, I mean – decided to retreat from the world, hiding in plain sight. I am one.” he finished, smirking.

Harry smiled back. He suddenly had the inkling that he wasn’t the only one living in an enlarged apartment. He wanted to comment on this, but Goken hadn’t finished his story.

“After our retreat, there had been a sudden increase in the number of incidents involving arrogant and drunk people holding katanas. The Meiji Restoration of 1866 brought an end to this, effectively removing the self-appointed samurai from the regular armed forces and forbidding them to wear their weapons in the streets.”

There was a pause, while Harry contemplated all that had been said. After sipping his tea, the man continued.

“Through unlikely alliances, the Emperor’s line imported magical blood from Emishi descendants, and he had protected each and every honest magical person in Japan since then, even interrupting trials and granting pardon when needed. And it is my job to find those persons.” he concluded.

“So...” Harry spoke tentatively. “You are a wizard?”

Stating the obvious was the first step to acceptance, and the man nodded.

“Where’s your wand?” Harry asked.

“My what?”

Harry looked at the man as if he had suddenly grown a second head. “Your... your wand. The stick you use to do magic.” he elaborated.

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

Harry extracted Flamel’s wand from his locket and showed it to the man. “This.”

Goken looked at the stick inquiringly. “Can you explain? Or better, yet, demonstrate?”

Harry nodded. “Lumos.” The light was intense, and he extinguished it immediately.

After a few moments of eye adaptation, Goken recovered his sight, and looked at Harry in wonder. "We don't have that. We have this." he said, extracting a blade from inside his robes.

Harry looked at it in awe. It was beautiful. The 20-inch long gleaming blade was adorned with Japanese symbols and its handle showed a coiled dragon ready to strike. The short sword was beautiful, and it radiated... something. Something he experienced recently.

Looking up, he met the man's smile. "It's... it's you?"

Goken nodded. "This is my wakizashi. As a true samurai, I have the privilege of owning a magical daisho: a katana and a wakizashi imbued with my essence."

Harry looked at the blade again, marvelling at its delicacy. Yet he knew instinctively that it was a strong and deadly weapon.

"We don't have... sticks." Goken was saying thoughtfully. "We have our blades. I have taken lives with them, and saved others. But I started to think about it several years ago. They aren't versatile enough for today's society."

The man was frowning, before looking at Harry with something akin to hope in his eyes. "Would you like to share?"

"Huh?" asked Harry, who hadn't heard the man's monologue, still taken by the sword.

Goken smirked, before taking a sincere look. "I want to share pieces of our knowledge. How you use your... sticks, against how we use our blades."

Harry thought about it, before smirking. "Alright. You have some aspirin?"

Two weeks later...

"Lumos."

“Nox.”

“Wingardium Leviosa.”

“Finite Incantatem.”

The male voice resounded in one of the inner rooms of Goken’s dojo. The man had just returned from a round-trip to Switzerland with Harry, and was testing his new wand, using the memories Harry had given him. It worked perfectly, and the man was smiling like a kid opening his Christmas gifts.

Harry smiled as well, and remembered the same afternoon, two weeks ago, when he had copied his memories in the man’s mind, and the man’s offered memories in his own. That was why Harry had been able to fight so well that evening. Thinking back about it, Harry still felt the elation of the battle coursing through his veins.

It had been a revelation.

Occidental magic seemed to rely on wand movement and voice, but Harry suspected that there was more to know, simply because he was already capable of impressive wandless magic. Japanese magic relied more on physical and mental prowess and dedication in everyday life, including martial arts.

When Goken had tested him, earlier that day, he had mostly defended, using the few magical abilities he had concerning a physical confrontation. The evening fight had been different, though. Following the man’s memories and earlier recommendations, Harry’s magic had flown in his veins and he had then moved with a grace that hadn’t been his a mere hour before. Even though he was controlling a body looking older in order to hide his prowess from the outside world.

The man had also given him an important ability in sword fighting, and Harry had understood more about Goken’s behaviour during his two tests: the ability to hide one’s mind. Normally, it involved several years of hard training to discipline one’s mind, but Harry had already achieved a level of control on his mind that was unheard of. Strangely,

to Harry, the process felt similar to switching to the gaseous reality, except it involved only his mind. It made him think about it, though. Was it possible to Apparate only a part of his body in or out of the gaseous reality?

An hour after testing Goken's wand, this kind of thoughts had been stored aside while his mind had returned in full fight mode. Harry looked at the man in front of him. Goken was, once again, pushing him to his limits. The sword training had been quick, and he was now trying to learn other attack and defence techniques. Today, it was the fan, and after having successfully blocked thrown pebbles, he was trying to defend against arrows. The fragile-looking paper and wood constructs, when properly imbued with one's magic, were actually stronger than steel, and Harry finished the exercise with only one arrow past him.

As the time for the kendo lesson approached, they stopped to recuperate, before Harry Apparated the two of them to the Budokan.

"One of these days, you'll have to teach me this." said Goken, referring to Harry's mean of transportation.

The addressed teen smiled good-naturedly. "To continue in our mutually benefiting exchange, you'll have to teach me something of equal value."

The man seemed thoughtful as he was donning the padded kendo armour. "I might have an idea about it." he said, before leaving for his teaching period.

Harry finished donning his customized garb before joining James and Tracey in the second level group. Unbeknownst to everyone save Harry and Goken, Harry's armour wasn't made uniquely of leather. It was doubled with metal bars which gave the whole armour a total weight of 100 pounds. Adjusting to the additional weight while gently sparring with his cousin and friend, Harry was working his Metamorphmagus abilities full-time, and stronger-than-normal muscles and bones began to be an integral part of his normal shape. The following Tuesday night...

The apartment was silent and everybody was sleeping well, but the phone's urgent shrill rang suddenly, waking several of the light sleepers. Being the nearest, Jorg jumped on the phone.

"What?" he barked as loud as he could without wanting to wake the others any more. It was still 3:20am.

"I need Harry." said a male voice. "It's urgent."

Jorg turned around, and noticed that Harry was standing in the doorway of his room. "It's for... you." he said, and had barely the time to finish his sentence when the boy's eyes lit up and he Apparated through the few meters separating him from the phone.

"Harry here." he said.

"Goken here. I need you in my dojo. Can you come?"

The last sentence was uttered in the emptiness of thin air as Jorg was trying to recover the falling phone. Harry had disappeared again.

Mere seconds later, a loud pop could be heard in the phone and Goken hung up. He was half-dressed in a battle uniform and indicated another one waiting for him, with the appropriate weapons nearby. Harry modified his features to adapt to the adult-sized garb and started to put it on. While they both equipped themselves, Goken started to explain.

"There has been a break-out in a Siberian prison a few weeks ago, followed by a wave of killings, but they informed us only three days ago, because it stopped suddenly. Guess what? It has picked up here."

"What is it?"

"We don't really know. People have been killed through barbarous means, and no one had found the murderer. Or murderers, plural. The Russian swear only one man escaped, though."

“Why do you need me?”

“The first Japanese murder has been signalled by a former student of mine, three minutes ago. I need you to bring me there, and you are a skilled fighter as well.” the man said, before pausing, looking at him intently. “I don’t want you to die, though, so be careful.”

“Yes, sensei.” Harry answered, equally intently. “Where is it?”

“Wakkanai, on the Hokkaido island. Take the location from my mind, I know you can, and it will be quicker.”

Harry fetched the location, and, once their swords were secured, he Apparated them both there.

Once on the docks of the targeted town, Harry noticed that there were several persons up despite the wee hour, and, surveying the street, he found a large porch under which he could Apparate in unnoticed.

“Let’s separate.” he said. “You have your ways, and I have mine.”

Goken nodded, and they shimmered into tangibility again. As Harry disappeared again, the man ran to the hideously disfigured victim and started to talk with his former student, a plump woman in her forties, in hushed tones. Harry, still in the gaseous reality, explored her immediate memories and was startled to see that she had actually seen the attack as it was being committed, and it clearly showed the kind of attacker it was. It was an overly large wolf, although strangely shaped. The hind legs, for instance, seemed longer than your usual wolf species. Not having time for subtleties, Harry imported her immediate memories before darting in the direction the man-attacking wild animal had taken.

He didn’t have to go very far. Three miles later, there was a small house down the road, and battle sounds were coming from it. Harry returned to the tangible reality and approached the scene. The full moon was illuminating whatever remained of the outside door. It had

visibly been blasted through, as only a few pieces of wood remained on its hinges. The huge wolf-like creature had already killed the man with vicious slashes in his abdomen. Its grey fur matted by blood, the monster was now slowly killing the woman, oblivious to her screams. Of was it enjoying them?

Harry drew his tanto, a foot-long one-sided dagger, and threw it at the creature. Not waiting for an eventual reaction, he drew his katana and charged at the beast.

His tanto throwing wasn't on par with his sword skill, and it landed sideways, only serving as a distraction to turn the monster away from its prey. The wolf-like beast whirled around, his yellow eyes looking at him in surprise, and Harry's move, angled because of him jumping over upturned furniture, sliced diagonally through its left side, cutting a few ribs in the process. The beast coughed blood and shook violently, its last moves ripping the katana out of Harry's grasp, before it fell on the wooden floor, lifeless.

Harry couldn't do anything for the eviscerated man, but the woman was still alive, and he went to her mind to stop the pain, before focusing on the deadly wounds. He brought the same compassion and knowledge he had used on James, so many years ago, and the wounds started to close slowly.

Several minutes later, he was halfway done when he heard a gasp at the door, and turned his gaze toward the intruder, afraid that it was another monster showing up.

It wasn't a monster, though. It was Goken, and the man was gaping at something behind him. A feeling of dread forming, Harry tried to move aside while drawing his wakizashi, but the large wolf he had thought dead shoved him forward and he fell beside the woman. The last thing he felt, before Apparating out of the immediate danger with the woman, was the beast's powerful jaws tearing through his left arm's padded armour and underlying flesh.

At the same time, in the sun-lit part of the world...

Hermione stepped off the plane, leading her parents by a few steps. They were greeted by Genevieve and, after recovering their luggage,

the young scientist led them to her car. After a short ride, they found themselves in the large house again, and settled the suitcases in their rooms before getting a cup of coffee.

“ So, have you already been to Switzerland before?” asked Genevieve.

“No.” answered Edward Granger. “We had been to Germany, Italy, France, and Austria before, but never here.”

“I’m a scientist, so I’m probably not the best one to guide you through the city, but you will find that it’s easy enough to get documentation on places to visit. Actually,” she said, standing up and fetching a folder from a nearby cupboard, “I already collected a few fliers on interesting places. We can start by a trip on the lake tomorrow, for instance.”

They nodded, and that started two weeks of vacation, during which Hermione and Genevieve discussed about the latter’s problems with neutrino traps.

Back in Japan...

Harry screamed in pain. It wasn’t a pain due to external wounds or a mental one. It was the pain that he could feel flowing through his veins, starting at the bite. The huge wolf-like creature had pierced through the armour’s thin plating and had actually bitten his arm. He was sure that there was an illness flowing through his veins, now, and it was something he loathed.

Concentrating with all his might, he pushed the pain away and surveyed what was happening to him. Thanks to his Metamorphmagus powers and his proper mind ordering, he had a better understanding of his own body than anyone else, and noticed his blood being changed by the bite effect.

He didn’t want that, though. He didn’t want to be changed into something he felt he wouldn’t like. He focused his Metamorphmagus powers on the infectious agent and succeeded in routing most of it

back to the bleeding wound so that it would exit his body. He still felt it had changed him, though, and hoped that it wouldn't be too serious.

After sealing the wound, he noticed something else. While his blood had started to be changed, a dark grey mist had started to form around his memory of the bite and had been creeping in his whole mind. Once again, he wouldn't allow it and scooped all of it, including the memory of the bite which continued to leak it, into the now-empty stone container which used to imprison Voldemort's influence. The mist wasn't the same, though. It was something dark as well, but more chaotic in nature, whereas Voldemort was controlled evilness.

All of this had lasted several minutes, during which he had been oblivious to the world around him. When he emerged from his self-healing trance, he noticed the unconscious woman in front of him, whose wounds had stopped bleeding. Going to her mind, he checked to see if there were traces of the greyish mist as well, but there weren't, and he concluded that it might be a side effect of the bite only, as the woman had "only" been raked by the wolf's claws.

Looking around, he noticed his sensei, still at the door, but facing outwards, his katana raised. The monster seemed to have disappeared, and Harry returned to tangibility.

Goken turned around, poised to attack, but he noticed his apprentice and the woman he was holding, and relaxed.

"What happened?" they both asked at the same time, before laughing nervously.

Being first in the timeline, Harry started, explaining about chasing and killing the monster, and healing the woman afterwards. Goken admired the youngster's dedication for life, but scolded him.

"Never turn your back to an enemy."

"But he was dead!" argued Harry.

"Perhaps, but the evidence shows that he wasn't."

“I sliced through half of him, and he fell like a dead weight.”

“I assure you that the wolf I chased away wasn’t dead at all. It had a scar on the side of its torso, but that was all.”

Harry was flabbergasted. How could a mere wolf, whatever its size and ferocity, heal from such a deadly wound? Unless...

He frowned.

“What?” asked Goken.

“It must be a magical creature.” Harry muttered. “I must see Hermione about that.”

“You are going to rest, first.” said Goken. “You are deadly pale, and I’m not sure that it’s the right time for travelling around the world.”

The man was right, and they cleaned their weapons before sheathing them. Goken took the woman in his arms and headed out, Harry just behind.

Once outside, though, Harry flinched.

Goken heard him and turned around. “What is it?”

“I don’t know. It’s the moon. It’s... too bright.” Harry said, shielding his eyes. Internally, the boy sensed the dark mist swirl angrily in its prison. ‘It’s fortunate I locked it away.’ he thought. ‘I don’t want to know what would have happened if I hadn’t.’

After straightening up, he followed his sensei back to the village, while the man was retelling his actions.

“When I arrived, the wolf was approaching you from behind, and you know what happened next. When you disappeared, it looked confused and I attacked it. Despite having jumped on you, it seemed fatigued, and I succeeded in landing a blow or two. It jumped out,

though, and quickly disappeared in the forest. I may be a springy old man,” he said, and they both smirked, “but I can’t beat a wolf running, so I kept guard on the house, knowing that you would reappear there.”

They gave the half-healed woman to the town’s healer and told the police about the house down the road and about the creature. That was all they could do for the moment, and Harry Apparated them both to Goken’s dojo, where he slumped on a bunk, exhausted.

After sleeping deeply for a few hours, Harry was refreshed, and Apparated back home, where he launched into an edited version of the events. Despite knowing that the boy wasn’t telling everything, the others had little choice but scold him for his recklessness, before hugging him in relief.

As it was late morning already, Vernon was working at the bank, and Petunia left the apartment to bring him his lunch, with a side order of news about Harry’s whereabouts. As everyone returned to their previous activities, Harry went at the phone. He had to ask Hermione about the creature. After all, even if the wolf was now licking its wounds, it would strike back later.

Trying the Grangers’ residence number, he found their answering machine, and remembered that the girl had told him her vacation plans earlier that week. Shaking his head at his forgetfulness, he started to dial his Swiss home’s number when Tracey arrived behind him.

“Who are you calling?” she asked, out of curiosity. Harry was more the kind of boy to actually go to places, and he only rarely used the phone.

“Hermione.” he answered. “I have to ask her about the wolf.”

She took the phone from his hands and smirked. “Since it’s four in the morning, she must be sleeping.”

Harry looked at the sun-lit windows, frowning, before registering her meaning. "I'm not used to the world being round." he laughed.

"You know," she said impishly, "it took a while to humanity to get used to the fact. Some of us are just more evolved than others."

After a surprised pause, he lunged after her, and she squealed. Soon after, the two of them were running around in the enlarged flat.

"Come here! I'll show you "evolved"!" Harry was mock-yelling, while Tracey was just laughing.

Jorg was sitting at the kitchen table, filling job applications, and he looked up, smiling at the youngsters' games. A few hours later, he was sitting on his knees, facing a wizened old man.

"Why do you want to apply?" asked the man. They had reviewed his application together, and everything else was good in it.

"I want to work on ambitious projects." Jorg answered. "I want to help anyone on these. I know that the computers have helped mankind in the past and I'm sure they will help us again."

"And why here, in Japan?"

"My family moved here a few weeks ago. I wanted to stay with them. I'm sure I can promote Japan's computing research, if you would have me."

The man looked at him, pondering, before taking a decision.

"I have received several candidates already, Mr Thomson. Despite your application being one of the best, I still have scheduled meetings with a few more. I will contact you on Monday to give you the result."

Jorg nodded, and thanked the man, before heading out. At the same time...

“You have WHAT?”

The voice was so loud that Harry had to remove his ear from the earpiece in order not to be deafened. He had explained his adventures to Hermione over the phone, and she seemed to have drawn hasty conclusions.

“I told you I fought with it, but it got driven away by my sword teacher.”

“Harry, you told me it was the full moon, and you told me the wolf was unusually large and misshaped. Can’t you see the link?”

He thought about it, but didn’t see her meaning. ‘She must have read some more books.’ he thought. He could perhaps have seen the link if he had explored Lupin’s mind more thoroughly when he had seen him. As it was, he only knew that Lupin was a "werewolf" without knowing the real meaning of the word, and that he was afraid of the moon. Despite stories of werewolves being well-known, even in the muggle world, Harry hadn’t had a normal childhood, and had never been told the story.

“Listen,” she was continuing, “I need to see you. How long does it take for you to be here?”

“Half an hour. Twenty minutes, if I hurry.”

“Be there in fifteen.” she said, and hung up.

Harry looked at the phone in wonder, before hanging up as well. Taking a pen, he scribbled something on the notification board Jorg had set up for this very reason.

“What did she want?” asked Tracey, looking up from her novel.

Harry looked at her, grinning. “Fancy a trip to Switzerland?”

She nodded, and marked her page before putting the book down, while he was adding something to the message.

She stood and took his proffered hand, and they disappeared. If anyone outside of their family were to read the board, the message would have been comical.

Gone to Switzerland – will be back soon – H&T

Once there, they found an upset Hermione pacing restlessly. She seemed to calm down a tad by seeing Tracey behind Harry.

“I want to see if you have any marks.” she told Harry.

“Good day to you, too.” he answered, but it didn’t placate her the slightest bit and he sighed. “Very well. What do you think this beast is?”

She looked at him. “Full moon, overly large and misshaped wolf, that doesn’t ring a bell?”

Harry and Tracey looked at each other, before shaking their heads at her.

“And if I ask you what is a werewolf?”

Tracey paled, while Harry looked intrigued. “What does it have to do with-”

Hermione sighed, interrupting him. She then frowned, bringing a select memory forward. “Come and help yourself.” she said, pointing at her forehead.

Harry obeyed, and then reeled back, paling dramatically. “That’s what it is!” he whispered.

“You understand the danger, now?” she asked, her voice still having the shrilling undertone. “You could have been bitten, and you’d be a

werewolf as well, transforming into the same thing under the full moon, three nights a month, and attacking innocents.”

“But... I didn’t transform... I mean...” started Harry, before biting his tongue.

Oops. Double oops.

“WHAT?” the two girls shrieked at the same time.

Genevieve’s head peeked through the half-open door. “As happy I am for seeing you here, kids, it’s a little bit early for yelling, don’t you think?”

“Sorry.” said Harry, but Genevieve had left, already late for work, and the two girls’ incensed glare made him shut up. The glare quickly transformed into concerned glances.

“You have been... bitten?” asked Tracey in a little voice. “You didn’t tell me.”

“Sorry.” answered Harry. “I didn’t want to scare the family by telling them that. Besides, it’s quite healed, now.”

“Werewolf bites don’t heal, Harry.” stated Hermione. “They just don’t. Where is it?”

Harry rolled his left sleeve, and the two girls gasped. Hermione went to the nearby table, where she had disposed several books, all open on a particular page. Taking one, she went to Harry and they compared the wounds.

“You are almost right, Harry.” she finally said. “It doesn’t appear as if you were freshly bitten, but you still have a mark. You said you didn’t transform?”

“Yes. The full moon was... oppressive, afterwards. Too bright, I remember. But I didn’t transform into... that.” he said, pointing at another picture on the book. “I felt the bite trying to contaminate me

but I pushed most of it away. It invaded my mind as well, but I contained that part even more easily.”

Tracey hugged him, a few tears of relief escaping.

Hermione was thoughtful. “So, you feel the moon’s effect yet you don’t transform. I’m curious...”

She turned a few pages and read intently, before standing up suddenly, darting to the kitchen. Harry had just the time to grasp the page title before she came back. It was about werewolf abilities.

Tracey gasped, and Harry looked at Hermione worriedly. The bushy haired girl, back from the kitchen, sat down in front of him, an intent look on her face, a towel on her lap, and a knife in each hand.

“Werewolves have an unnatural ability to heal themselves. Any wound closes in seconds.” she stated, and Harry remembered the wound he had inflicted, now knowing why it hadn’t been lethal.

“Harry, you were able to heal yourself quite easily before, right?” she asked.

He acquiesced, and she nodded. “I want to try something. Try not to use that ability right now.”

She wouldn’t take no for an answer, and the two other kids shuddered, suspecting what would come next. Tracey, not particularly interested by witnessing it, stood up to look through the windows, while Harry extended his arm forward.

Hermione sliced Harry’s forearm with one of the sharp knives, and blood started to dribble. Harry gasped, and it took most of his willpower not to use his powers to heal himself on the spot. However, after several seconds, the wound closed itself.

Hermione nodded, as if she had suspected it. Taking the other knife, she started to speak again. “Werewolves are allergic to silver. Even merely pressing a silver object to a werewolf’s skin can leave welts.

The only way to kill a werewolf is to inflict a lethal wound with a silver weapon.”

She looked at Harry intently, and pressed the knife, sideways, on Harry’s forearm. At first, the boy didn’t react, but he was quickly starting to feel uncomfortable with the pressed cutlery item. After a minute, he felt his arm go numb, and removed it from Hermione’s grasp, rubbing it to re-establish his blood flow.

Hermione was looking at him expectantly, and he retold her what he had felt. She nodded and asked for his arm again. Knowing that it was the ultimate test, he obeyed and she sliced his arm with the knife.

Harry yelped at the pain. Strangely, it was reminiscent of the pain he had felt when the werewolf had bitten him, although it was more localized. After a few seconds, the wound hadn’t started to heal, and he focused on his Metamorphmagus powers to bring the flesh together again, effectively healing the cut.

Hermione was thoughtful, and Tracey was worried. “There is no documented occurrence of incomplete lycanthropy.” the Ravenclaw stated.

“I guess I got lucky to quench the infection at once.” Harry replied.

Hermione nodded, her thoughts having acquired a will of their own, now churning on terms like ‘infection’, ‘disease’, and ‘vaccine’.

Harry and Tracey looked at each other. Their friend was undoubtedly thrown into her studying orbit again. They thanked her and prepared to disappear again, when Hermione shook herself awake.

“Just promise me...” she started, looking at Harry intently.

“What?” he asked.

“Promise us that you won’t pull a stunt like that again.”

“I promise.” he said. He wouldn’t pull a stunt like that again. He knew he had been lucky not to succumb to the infectious agent, and didn’t want to be bitten again. On top of that, he now knew about the werewolves’ unnatural endurance to wounds and wouldn’t be taken by surprise again. However, Hermione’s wording had left him with the possibility to hunt the beast, and he would.

They took their leave, and arrived in Japan just in time for dinner. Harry and Tracey ate silently, both of them thinking about everything Hermione had said. After dinner, Harry plunked himself on his bed, reading one of his brother’s comics. An hour later, he was preparing for the night, when he felt something in his mind.

Harry didn’t like feeling unknown things in his mind.

He went there, and, after a bit of searching, found out that it was coming from the stone prison holding the grey mist. He didn’t want to open it, but, remembering the other things he did with Voldemort, decided that he would build the same visioning outlet, to see what was happening. Once done, he looked through it.

He was seeing trees. Many trees. And there was a village nearby. He crossed a road and there was a road sign with those annoying symbols on it. He was angry, and a tad sore on his left side, but he would exact vengeance tonight. Tonight was the night of the full moon, and if these pesky muggles thought they had got the better of him, he would show them that there was a reason why no one had beaten him.

Harry removed himself from the vision, and shook his head to clear it from the anger he had felt. In no way would he be controlled by such primal urges. He also felt that it was only thanks to his impromptu self-healing that he had succeeded in removing the most of the werewolf curse and getting an insight on the mind of the one who had bitten him.

Remembering what he had just seen, he stood up and opened his bedroom door, intending to go to the notification board.

Tracey was coming back from the bathroom, though, and she intercepted him. "Where are you going?" she asked.

"Werewolf hunting." he said resolutely.

"But... you promised..."

"I promised not to pull a "stunt like that". Hermione knew I couldn't let innocents be slaughtered, and worded the promise so that I could hunt the beast. I won't be bitten again, Trace." he said, hugging her. "Besides, he got me by surprise. It won't happen again. That I promise."

She sniffled for a few seconds before acquiring a determined look herself. 'Uh oh.' thought Harry.

"Take me with you." she said.

"It's too dangerous! Trace, you don't know about my training with Goken, and the two of us barely pushed him away."

"What training?" she asked. "When you come out of it for kendo sparring, you stay with the second group."

"It's mainly because I'd rather stay with you. Besides, the armour I use then makes it difficult to move quickly."

"What do you mean?"

He led her into his room and showed her the carefully folded garb. "Take it." he merely said.

The girl cocked an eyebrow, but he was serious, and she obeyed.

Or tried to.

On her first try, the armoured vest slipped her fingers. On her second, she grasped it more firmly and lifted it with difficulty, before releasing it.

“What is this?” she asked, while Harry took the discarded vest, folding it carefully as if it was a mere shirt.

“50 pounds of metal hidden in a regular kendo vest.”

“You are sparring with us wearing a 50-pound outfit?”

“Err... no. That was the vest. The rest of the garment weighs 50 pounds as well.”

She looked at it, stunned, but shook her head after a few seconds. “It doesn’t matter. I want to go with you. You can always drop me in that "gaseous reality" of yours. I’d be able to see what happens.”

He nodded, but something tugged at his mind. He wanted to ask her "what if I die?" but knew that she wouldn’t take the question well.

“I will give you a memory, Trace. It’s only to use if you get stuck in the gaseous reality, and only if there is nobody around you.”

“Alright, but... Harry?”

“Yes?”

“Why don’t you give us all of it?”

“What do you mean?”

“You didn’t teach me, Hermione, and Ron how to Apparate like you do. Is there a reason?”

Harry felt ashamed. Barring his loaded schedule from the previous year, there wasn’t any real reason behind that. And he suspected that Tracey would have liked to know how to do it, three weeks ago.

“I’m sorry.” he replied. “It’s just that, the subject never came up, you know? With school and such... I agree that you should learn that, but

keep in mind that it's not something to show anyone else. To Apparate in Britain, normally, one has to get a license, and, to get the license, you must be seventeen."

Tracey nodded. The topic of Apparation was one frequently discussed between the stealthy upperclassmen of her House, but she hadn't known, until now, that there was an age limit.

"I agree to teach you that, but not tonight," he said. "It wouldn't be good for any of us to go there with a pounding headache."

She thought about it for a second, before nodding. "Alright."

Harry gave her the memory, before going to the board. Once again, his message was short and to the point.

Gone to see Goken – back in a few hours – H&T

Taking Tracey's hand, he Apparated them both directly in Goken's lounge.

And realized his mistake.

Having seen numerous similar scenes in muggle minds, as well as witnessing them happening while in the gaseous reality, Harry knew that the grey shapes' in front of him weren't playing chess. Tracey, not used to recognize things in the gaseous reality, looked at him inquiringly.

"Why did we stop?"

"I guess we should wait in the corridor," said Harry, blushing, and he led them there while Tracey was frowning.

Once tangible again, he knocked at the door and smirked when he heard the hurried moves from inside. After a full minute, the dignified voice of his sensei called "Enter, Harry."

The boy obeyed and gaped. The man hadn't been restrictive in his choices, as there was not just one person with him. Two lithe women were flanking him, and the three adults were looking quite flushed, their outfits a bit ruffled.

The man shrugged at Harry's raised eyebrows. "As much as I like teaching you things, Harry, this can wait a few years, don't you think?"

Harry smirked. "Or I could just take it from your mind."

Goken huffed, but his eye caught the girl behind Harry, and he straightened himself up.

"What do you want, Harry?"

"How did you know it was me?"

"Only you can enter my house that way. Others have the politeness to ring beforehand. Especially as, after today's hard day, I was being massaged by those two."

Harry blushed, both at his impoliteness and at the obvious lie about the man's previous actions. Well... it wasn't exactly a lie, now, was it? "I was in a hurry," he mumbled.

"Oh?" simply asked the man, but his amused look faded into one of concern when he caught the boy's expression.

Harry looked up, suddenly serious. "It is starting again."

Goken looked at him in shock, before turning to his "masseuses."

"Out with you!"

They left gracefully, brushing against Harry and Tracey as they left.

"Aren't you going to pay them?" asked Harry, before smirking. "As professional masseuses, I'm sure they fetch quite a bit."

“No need, they were paid beforehand.” answered Goken absently, before returning to the subject at hand. “Where?”

Harry transferred his memory of a road sign covered in symbols and numbers, and Goken nodded. “Alright. The sign indicates distances for reaching Fukagawa, Asahikawa, and Sapporo. It must be a little on the northern road of Fukagawa.”

“Do you have a clear memory about a location nearby?” asked Harry. “Mine are rather indistinct.”

Goken nodded, and Harry fetched said memory. The man then jumped to his feet and went to the 20-foot wide cupboard hosting his numerous armours and weapons. He was busy fetching two sets of armour but Harry stopped him.

“Don’t take two.” he said.

Goken looked at him, then at Tracey. “Three?”

“No. One. For you.”

“Why?” he asked, and Harry knew that Tracey wanted to ask the same question.

“It will hinder me, and I can augment my toughness, remember?”

“What do you mean?” the girl asked.

Harry concentrated for a second. “Put your hand on my arm.”

She did, and gasped. It was hard as steel, and yet, it moved with the muscles underneath.

Goken was getting swords from the cupboard as well, when Harry interrupted him again. “Err... Sensei?”

The man looked at him. “Don’t tell me you don’t need these.”

“It’s not that. We are fighting a magical creature called werewolf, and it’s only hurt by silver weapons. Others will only slow him down.”

Goken looked at him in shock. After a few seconds, he retrieved his voice and whispered “That’s what it was used for.”

Harry looked at him inquiringly, but the man wasn’t explaining, frowning.

“Sensei?”

Goken raised his head. “Harry, you are going to do something utterly illegal, but, given the circumstances and their urgency, it seems we don’t have much choice.”

“What is it?”

“Change your features first, and do it so that nobody can recognize you.”

As Harry was obeying, growing taller under Tracey’s penetrating glance, the man continued to speak. “You are going to steal the Emperor’s Daisho.”

“Why?” asked Harry.

“Because it is the only daisho made entirely of silver. The legends have it that it was passed from generation to generation since the one Emperor who single-handedly stopped an unknown menace coming from the north.” he said, before frowning. “Like today.”

“Alright, I’m ready.” Harry said. “I believe you have a memory for me.”

Goken nodded, and Harry concentrated, before disappearing.

Once alone, the man continued to put his armour on. Looking at Tracey inquiringly, he asked. “Are you... like him?” he asked.

“No!” she replied, laughing lightly. “He’s one of his kind.”

“That’s what I thought. It’s not that I wouldn’t have liked it, but I have enough in my hands with him alone, you know?” said Goken, and Tracey nodded just as Harry was returning with the two weapons. They were unsheathed, their gleaming blade shining in the light, and Harry explained that the sheaths were stuck to the pedestal and that several alarms had started to ring when he removed the swords.

Once Goken ready, Harry wanted to give him the katana, but the man refused. “Your skill is improving, Harry, and, one day, you are going to be better than me.”

“I’m already are.” said Harry jokingly.

“You know things that I don’t, but have I already lost to you?” asked the man intently.

“Err... No. Sorry, sensei.”

“And I haven’t used magic yet.” Goken said, something which made Harry look up sharply. “Apart hiding my mind, of course.” the man amended. “Anyways, you work better with the katana for the moment. I’ll take the wakizashi and my own katana, so that, at least, I’ll be able to slow him down.”

Harry nodded and grasped the longer weapon in his right hand, while taking Tracey’s in his left. The girl gave her other hand to Goken, and the three of them disappeared once more, heading north.

To be continued in next chapter: Harry Situations...

Beware of the hairy beast,
Or your body’ll be its feast.
Harry’s life’s not peaceful yet,
On its length I wouldn’t bet.

Chapter 17 – Harry Situations

posted October 8th, 2005

Harry, Tracey, and Goken appeared on the road north of Fukagawa, in the large island of Hokkaido, and advanced northward, toward the small town of Chippubetsu.

They found the appropriate road sign near the town and followed the monster's trail, Goken on foot while Harry and Tracey were exploring a wider circle thanks to Harry's Apparating speed. When moving through the gaseous reality, though, they couldn't see colours, which meant that they had to exit it to read road signs and things like that.

Harry and Tracey found the first corpse mere minutes after launching the hunt. Harry thought it fortunate that, thanks to the greyness of the gaseous reality, Tracey wasn't subjected to the gruesome nature of the crime scene. It shocked her, however, that the monster had killed in full daylight. Even now, it wasn't night time yet, and that meant that the werewolf was killing while in his human form. Harry and Tracey looked at each other, both realizing something. If, as Hermione indicated, a quiet boy could become a savage killer when transformed, what would an already murderous adult give?

After that first murder, they found several others, the bloodied trail going further into the town. By the time they found the creature, the night had fallen, and the moon had risen. The howl echoing from the roof of a nearby garage made their blood freeze for half a second, before they went there.

Harry returned to tangibility on the garage roof, and saw the towering werewolf standing on its hind legs, greeting the moon. He barely had time to bring the katana in an attack position when the beast charged him. Still feeling the oppressive nature of the moon, he didn't readjust his stance in time, and could only defend himself as the massive paws tore at his clothes, his steel-like skin showing behind, intact. Using a narrow window of opportunity, he slammed the katana side on the wolf's snout.

The wolf recoiled, howling from pain, before lunging at Harry again, not quite realizing that the boy was much stronger than it seemed.

This time, Harry was better prepared and crouched under the beast's trajectory, his katana up.

He had wanted the beast to impale itself, but it failed, as the strong beast jerked wildly and escaped the lethal thrust by just a fraction of an inch. Finally judging that his current opponent was too dangerous, the wolf jumped from the 3-storey high building.

The move seemed to concur with the saying "jumping from the frying pan into the fire" as someone was waiting for him down there. Goken had followed the howls and the subsequent battle sounds, and saw the large beast plunging toward him. It awakened something in the man's eyes, and he jumped toward the wolf, drawing his katana at the same time, and slicing through the wolf's belly in a graceful strike. Both fell down afterwards, but one was in better condition than the other. The wolf had stopped controlling his fall when struck by the samurai, and a few bones had snapped audibly when he had slammed on the ground. Except for the rebound incurred by such a fall, the beast didn't move afterwards.

Goken approached from the fallen beast confidently, drawing the silver wakizashi, readying for the coup de grace. Witnessing the proceedings from his vantage point, Harry frowned. Something was wrong...

When he understood, he gasped, and yelled at Goken to stop. The addressed man recognized Harry's voice and looked up. Someone else had heard Harry's shout, though, and the wolf stood suddenly, jumping at the unsuspecting sensei nearby without a sound.

The beast had just been waiting, its wounds healing by themselves.

Harry slowed time barely before it struck, and Apparated below as fast as he could. With a deafening crack, he appeared beside his mentor and pushed hard. The man, still in the normal time flow, felt a sharp pain as the beast's right paw tore parallel wounds through his cheeks, and another on his side as Harry pushed at the same time. The beast's left paw had just slammed against his armour, and its powerful jaw, his deadliest attack, was nearing his jugular. However, being dragged to the ground by Harry's move allowed him to evade

the attack. Amazed by the wolf's sudden attack and stunned by his abrupt fall, but still alive, he noticed the wolf jump back and flee.

Harry looked at him in concern.

"Go... and kill him." Goken wheezed. Harry nodded and, taking the man's hand, he deposited him in the gaseous reality. He then hurled himself through walls and windows, seeking the wolf.

Said wolf was clever enough to avoid confrontation when he could. However, his natural compulsion to kill, doubled with the werewolf's instincts, made him search for preys as soon as he thought to be far enough from the garage.

Harry, in his quick circling of the zone in the gaseous reality, finally took in the fighting sounds and yells, and he headed there, silently appearing behind the beast. In the gaseous reality, though, things weren't always as they seemed, and Harry had missed the simple fact that a mirror was hanging on the wall in front of him. The wolf saw him there, and sent a wicked kick behind him, sending him crashing in a wooden cupboard. Instead of finishing him or his victim, he then lunged through the already-broken door. The silver katana still in his hand, Harry extracted himself from the rubble and noticed that his shirt, already torn from the wolf's earlier attack, was in tattered ribbons. He shook it off his body and glanced at the apartment inhabitants. He could do nothing for the parents, and the young boy would live even without his immediate help.

He Apparated out, lunging after the creature who, apparently, had taken the wrong turn and had entered the rooftop. Said roof was much higher than the garage's, and the wolf wasn't sure he could jump from it without suffering serious injuries. "Serious" here meant that he would have to wait at least five minutes for them to heal, and his opponent would be able to follow him there and kill him faster than that. He was pacing restlessly, throwing angry gazes at Harry.

As the beast refused the fight, Harry went after it, but the wolf darted to the side and lunged toward the exit. Harry Apparated there quicker than him, though, and, sent his sword in a sidewise arc. The precious

metal made contact with the werewolf's right shoulder, severing muscles in the way, and the animal howled in pain.

Now, there is one drawback of always being the best.

There was one thing that that particular werewolf couldn't grasp, having always had the upper hand in all his fights: howling one's pain while engaged in a deadly fight is an equally deadly luxury. Stepping on the side and using an accelerated downward strike, Harry brought that lesson home quickly – and definitely – and the howl ceased abruptly.

After all, no living creature could howl when its voice box was separated from its lungs.

Harry then tried something he had never done before, and wouldn't do later either: he went into the dying man's mind. It wasn't much, for him, and he thought he could recover memories about the beast's identity, for instance. Once there, he saw the memory blocks melting into nothingness, and the white building crumbling into dust. The beast was dying quickly, and Harry barely noticed the surrounding light flicker as he concentrated on extracting himself quickly. Panting, he sat on a chimney protruding from the roof, next to the dead body, in order to recover from the brief but taxing fight. Even if he didn't know it consciously, his instincts told him that he had been very close of being trapped in a dead mind, possibly forever.

After recovering his breath, Harry took Ravenclaw's ring – thankfully platinum and not silver – and an Unbreakable bottle from his locket. Using the former, he then enlarged the latter enough to put the werewolf's head inside – since it was already separated from the body, and said body wasn't that useful for identification. Shrinking the bottle and its content back to a manageable size, he stowed it where it came from and aimed the ring at the headless body.

“Incendio.” he said, and the werewolf's body was covered in flames.

The moon had disappeared behind clouds and Harry didn't feel its oppressive light anymore. Taking advantage of that, he stayed there to make sure that nothing unpleasant would happen – in the vein of,

for example, the body disappearing suddenly or the whole building taking flame. He also contacted Tracey mentally and told her that the beast had been disposed of, and that she could fetch Goken, get out of the gaseous reality, and come over. A few minutes later, the two of them entered the rooftop, Goken holding a crying boy in his arms.

“We found him in the way.” he explained. “He was lost, and-”

“The wolf killed his family.” Harry said sombrely, nodding. “I haven’t been quick enough.” he finished grimly.

“Don’t do that.” said his sensei gently. “The whole event is finished, and you have emerged successful. Think of all the lives saved by that fact, this boy’s included.”

Tracey looked at the man thoughtfully. “It has happened to you, hasn’t it?”

“Yes.” said the man, but he didn’t elaborate, and the four of them watched as the magical fire was removing even the traces of its presence. That was when Goken noticed that he had forgotten something.

The next morning...

“Takumi! Takumiii!”

The plump woman was yelling through the small apartment at the back of their garage.

“What is it?” his husband asked, entering the small kitchen. She was pointing at the television and his voice failed him suddenly. There, on the screen, was the same object that he had picked up that night, and the commentary was filling him with dread. Theft?

Last night, he had heard fighting sounds and even a thunderclap, and, after the quietness returned, he had peered outside and noticed nothing but a sword resting on the ground, next to his door. It was very beautiful, and, as nobody had reclaimed it, he stored it in his

garage, intending to give it to its owner – he thought that the first person able to describe it would be said owner. Seeing the news report, he knew that, now, anyone could describe it. It was the Emperor's wakizashi.

Ignoring his wife's cries about closing business or death penalty, he decided to uphold his honour and return the wakizashi himself. He wrapped it carefully, using the softest fabric he had at his disposal – incidentally, it was his wife's silk pyjamas, and she wailed a bit more – and headed toward Tokyo. It never crossed his mind that a weapon stolen in Tokyo couldn't appear at his doorstep mere minutes afterwards.

Once there, he succeeded in passing several barrages with the same message, and the imperial guard finally brought him before the emperor. Kneeling, he held the unwrapped weapon up, using the cloth to separate his hands from the noble blade.

When the Emperor asked him the story, he told him in quick sentences. Fortunately, he told the truth, because the ruler had the gift of detecting lies uttered in his presence. The Emperor thanked him and gave him a large sum for his loyalty, before storing the wakizashi on its support. He smiled, looking at his weapons.

Like everybody, he had initially thought that mere burglars had broken in, but all doors had been kept shut, and he suspected a more... refined theft. Goken's subsequent explanation had been quite mysterious as well. However, when he had seen the unnatural beast head, many things had become clearer, and he had accepted his returned katana – cleaned of all the impure blood – without much questioning. Especially as, unlike with anyone else, he couldn't tell if the young man next to Goken was telling the truth or not.

And the Emperor wasn't going to ask about it, since it would uncover one of the best-kept secret of his line.

Later...

Harry and Goken discussed a long time about self-inflicted guilt. By examining several possible scenarios, Harry understood that, even if he had been faster, it could have been even messier as well. As it

was, the boy not having any relatives, Goken had found him a nice orphanage, and Harry made sure that the orphanage's employees were intrinsically nice with children.

The two of them spent the next week calmly, not training any martial arts move except during the usual kendo courses. Instead, they delved into history and philosophical issues related to the Japanese martial arts. Harry learnt that there had been dozens of martial arts school, each teaching its own moves and counterattacks, as well as its own philosophy. Goken explained that several of them had died out, and a few had been continued by non-magical people. The man laughed while he said that, telling Harry that the muggles had misinterpreted the notion of Chi. The Chi initially represented the level of magical ability and, not having any, they had translated it into a vague notion of physical and mental strength.

Goken, while speaking about martial arts philosophy, told him more about these arts names. Harry knew the Japanese language already, so he quickly understood that kendo was different from kenjutsu even if both used swords. The first was a way of thinking, while the second was focused on actual fighting, possibly harming opponents. In the middle was the iaido which consisted in fluid moves to draw the katana, strike an opponent, clean the blade, and sheathe the weapon afterwards. Iaido was graceful and impressive, but unrelated to the kind of fight they had recently gotten themselves into. Goken explained the relations between the samurai and the bushido as well, and gave Harry a hand-written copy of the formalized Code which guided the samurai since the 13th century.

A couple of days later came the summer Olympic Games at Barcelona, and several members of Harry's family looked at the broadcasted events with interest, although it was for different reasons. James watched the martial arts competitions, while the twins looked at the gymnastics intently. Since Ulrike had visited Spain before, she shared views about the cultural environment with Petunia, while Jorg commented about the technical aspects of memorizing and transmitting the miscellaneous events and their results. Vernon only looked because the Games were a widespread topic in discussion these days, and it could help his image to be in touch with that kind of information. Harry and Tracey looked from afar, more interested in

visiting the parks around the town. Harry being able to take the two of them rather far away, they explored parks and other interesting views in a large radius, even doing a short trip to the Shaolin monastery for Harry to show Tracey where he had started his martial arts training.

If there was one single event in these games which had some bearing on Harry's training, it was the lighting of the Olympic flame. Everyone had held his breath when the paralympic archer Antonio Rebollo shot a lit arrow up across a stadium filled to the brink, in order to light the Olympic torch. Harry then remembered one of Goken's lessons, and took note of asking the man about archery. His current weaponry wasn't able to attack far, and seeing the broadcasted event had shown him that focus could do wonders.

After the initial interest in the Olympics, and despite the others' interest in the daily results broadcast – and Vernon's sudden interest in the current Upper House elections campaign and results –, Harry and Tracey settled in a peaceful routine. On mornings, the two of them would either do some homework or work on Tracey's Occlumency. Then they would eat with everybody and tend their pets afterwards. In the afternoons, they went with the others to the malls, parks, or other entertainment centres. Except on Mondays, of course, when Harry went to Goken's dojo to learn more about martial arts. Even though Jorg and James had designated a corner of the lounge for all sorts of electronic games, the two magical teenagers rarely stayed home. Afterwards, the evenings were spent at home, playing tabletop games with the whole family, except three times a week when the three kids participated to the kendo course.

Tracey, after learning about Harry's enhanced armour, started by sparring more gently when with him, afraid that he might break under the weight. Annoyed, he whispered once that if she continued like that, he would switch groups, and she stopped being soft. She was still surprised to see that he was just as much tired as the others at the end.

The days before Harry's twelfth birthday, the boy experienced a feeling of joyful anticipation, which he put onto the event's account.

He would discover that it wasn't entirely true.

That July 31st, Tracey kept him occupied at a local library while his family prepared everything. Harry, not having peered into Tracey's mind, was surprised to see that even his father had come home early for his birthday. They ate a feast comparable to Hogwarts' best meals and Harry opened his presents, thanking everyone in the process.

In the middle of the gift-giving session, though, the phone rang. It was Goken, and the man, in a strange voice, asked Harry to come over. The boy hung up and excused himself to his family before Apparating away. As he was approaching Goken's dojo at high speed, he wondered why his mentor had such a voice over the phone. He found him in his library and, not noticing anyone around, shimmered into view.

The place was clean, and the man was sitting on his knees in front of a low table. On said table was a long box, looking like a flat trunk. It was a 7-foot long box made of lacquered wood and decorated with metal plates, handles, and corners.

"Sensei?" asked Harry inquiringly.

"It's your birthday, isn't it?" asked the man, still staring at the box.

The boy nodded, and Goken looked up. "Happy birthday, then." he said, pushing the box toward him.

"Err... do you want me to open it here, or would you rather go to my apartment?" asked Harry. "We are having a birthday feast, and I'm sure there are some leftovers."

"Leftovers! Do I look like the kind of man to eat leftovers?" his mentor said, looking down at him with a haughty sneer.

Harry saw through the charade, though, and he only smirked, not baiting the man further.

"To answer your question, I'd rather you open it here, Harry. It's up to you, though. And I'll be glad to meet your family."

Harry nodded and unlocked the box. After a last glance at Goken, he opened the lid...

...and gasped, releasing it so brusquely that it slammed down.

“You didn’t!” he exclaimed.

Goken smiled. “I did. It’s not without compensation, though. Remember our deal?”

Harry looked confused for a moment, before remembering. He nodded. “You’ll have to wait until we are at home, though. Unless you refilled your aspirin cabinet without me knowing.”

The man smirked, and extracted a bottle from his pocket. “I knew I would need them. Always ready.”

Harry frowned. “Were you boy-scout earlier?”

“No!” the man exclaimed indignantly. “They stole my motto.” and he chuckled.

After a short pause, they became serious again. “Ready?” asked Harry, and Goken nodded.

Concentrating, Harry brought forth the memories of Apparating and transferred them in the man’s mind, and Goken recoiled under the strain, before absorbing several pills.

While his mentor was recuperating, Harry looked at the box in wonder, and opened it again. Goken had been right in saying it was better to open it here. The gleaming weapons were looking back at him, their deadliness evident. And there was...

“Sensei?”

“Yes?”

“It’s too much.”

Goken smiled. “I couldn’t give you only one, could I? Especially as it’s your birthday.” Returning serious, he continued. “It is the complete set of weapons a samurai may hold. Historically, they only walked the streets with their daisho – katana and wakizashi – but they could use other weapons as well. I seriously hope to increase your training before the Bon Festival for you not to cut yourself with the other ones.”

“Why are they so... big?” asked Harry, pointing at some of the items in the box, and Goken smiled.

“I’ll explain all of it, but, first of all, you must imbue them with your magical essence so that they’ll be yours definitely. That will reinforce them magically as well, rendering them virtually unbreakable. You might even be able to call one of them to you from a distance, if you focus on it sufficiently.”

“How do I do that?”

“The calling?”

“No, imbuing them with my essence.”

Goken took the smallest weapon, a tanto, and showed him the small hole in the handle. “Just put a drop of your blood in here. All of them function in the same way to that regard.”

“Even the...” asked Harry, pointing at the other weapons.

“Yes.”

The boy did as he was told, concentrating to keep his wound open long enough for blood to drop in each of his seven weapons. After each of them was done, his mentor bowed to it and sheathed it before stowing it back in the box. Once all were done with, Harry felt a strange humming sensation coming from the assembled weapons, and it was reassuring him somewhat.

“You already know about the shoto blades like the tanto and wakizashi.” his mentor continued. “The longer swords, or daito, are the katana, which you already know about, the tachi, which is a little longer, and the longest one is a nodachi. As I intend to teach you how to use them, you will need to learn to ride a horse too, as these are sword mainly used by cavalry, even if they can still be used successfully against shorter swords in regular fight.”

He smiled at Harry’s surprised glance and continued. “Speaking of horseback riding brings me to the two last weapons.” he said, removing them from the box again.

Bows.

“These are the two yumis of the samurai: the long daikyu and the shorter hankyu.” he said in his lecturing voice while motioning the 6-foot high bow first and the 4-foot next. “Both are traditionally made with bamboo and wood, held together with leather. Their asymmetric shape and their grip set at a third of its length allow the mounted archer to move it from one side to the other with ease.”

Harry was still gawking at the weapons, impressed by the quality of the set and by the sheer number of them. Now that they were all sheathed, though, he recovered his wits quickly and looked at the man for a second, before jumping on his feet and hugging him.

“Thank you. Thank you.” he repeated.

Goken smiled. Since their exchange of memories, he recognized and accepted more easily such manifestations of affection, and wasn’t expecting from Harry the seriousness and formality usually required for such a gift.

After a short time, they separated and Harry shrunk the box so that it would fit in his locket. As he closed the small container, he thought about it and reflected that, despite being practical, the locket wasn’t designed for weapon or wand drawing. He would do something about it, but first...

“Are you still rejecting our leftovers?” he asked Goken with a smirk.

“You know me.” the man answered.

“Let’s go, then.” answered the boy. “On your own. Follow me.” he added before Apparating out in front of the shocked man.

It took Goken a few minutes to harness his new memories properly, though, and Harry came back to tangibility, frowning.

“It doesn’t work.” said the man.

“You have to concentrate. The other wizards need a target location, but I didn’t think it was necessary, as you were just going to follow me.”

“Can you give me the location, then?” asked Goken.

Harry looked around. “Since it doesn’t seem to work as I thought it would, you should try it in this room first.” He smiled. “Just cross it.”

Goken looked at the farthest corner, memorizing it. He then concentrated, and disappeared with a popping sound, only to appear at the envisioned corner a fraction of second later. Harry then gave him the location of his apartment. Goken concentrated again, and disappeared as well.

Harry Apparated out as well, and followed the man easily, the disturbed gaseous reality swirling around Goken’s path.

Harry Apparated in after Goken, only to see his surprised family looking at them. James and Tracey were impressed to see the man there, but they knew that he was Harry’s closest thing to a mentor in Japan.

While Petunia offered Goken a large slice of the birthday cake, Harry told everyone that he had received an impressive gift from him, and, as they asked to see it, he showed it to them. They gawked at the

armoury, still impressive despite being sheathed, and Vernon turned toward Goken, frowning.

“Don’t you think it’s dangerous?” he asked the man.

“What do you mean?” asked Goken, cocking an eyebrow.

“Such... deadly weapons... in the hands of a 12 years old kid.”

Harry rolled his eyes and prepared a witty answer, but his mentor replied before him. “I think you are underestimating him.”

It was Vernon’s turn to raise an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“Harry is better at learning how to use these weapons than anyone I have ever been in contact with.” answered the samurai. “He is already good, and I believe that he could be even better. Actually, he often leads me to a draw, these days.”

“We have been fighting with metal swords since the first day we met.” Harry interjected.

“And he trains with heavy weights.” James piped in.

Whatever line of reasoning the others could have made at Harry’s previous sentence got shot out of the window. While Petunia was approaching a suddenly blushing James, Harry was looking at Tracey inquiringly but she shook her head in ignorance.

“What do you mean, dear?”

James looked at Harry imploringly, but there was nothing they could do as Petunia and Vernon prodded him more. The boy gave in. “I saw him, last time we went to the kendo course, when it was finished, he removed his outfit and it fell strangely on the floor.”

“Strangely?” asked Vernon.

“Yes. Mine rebounds a bit, but his fell like a dead weight. When he wasn’t looking, I went to his bedroom and tried to inspect it... but I couldn’t even lift it!”

Harry looked down. “Guilty.” he said simply, while Goken chuckled.

“I told Harry to spar using weights.” the man said. “Otherwise, he would have snapped the bokken again.”

“Harry? Show me that garb, please.” said Vernon.

The boy looked around, but, once again, there was no pleasant way out of it and he went to his room to fetch the outfit, which he didn’t give to Vernon directly, preferring to put it on the floor.

The man bent down to take it. “Why did you...” he started, but gasped as soon as he tried to lift it. Grasping it again with both hands, he lifted it again, the effort visible. “What is the meaning of this?” he asked, while Goken, seeming surprised, walked to the pile of "clothes."

Harry opened his mouth to answer, when Goken gasped as well. “Harry?” he asked inquiringly. “Just how much did you put?”

Harry mumbled something unintelligible but, prodded by Jorg, he spoke louder, addressing his mentor. “You told me that I could increase it as soon as I was feeling better with it.”

“That I did, Harry. But you didn’t answer my question.” the man said.

“100 pounds.” he said, and all but Tracey gasped. She did, though, when he amended himself. “And 150 in the outer robe.”

“250?” asked the Slytherin girl. “You said it was 100...” she said but stopped when everyone looked at her.

“I enlarged the metal parts and transfigured them into something heavier.” Harry said, taking the attention again.

There was a long pause, during which the adults reflected that Harry had carried the kendo outfit without breaking a sweat. The pause got interrupted, though, by a noise at a window. Eva and Maureen being the closest, they opened it – using the mechanism added by Abigail when she had remodelled the apartments: it was now possible to open the windows completely, but not fall through them – and a large horned owl landed in their four outstretched arms.

“Athina!” exclaimed Tracey, before helping Hermione’s exhausted bird up and removing the present tied to the owl’s leg. Harry was briefly upset that Ron had forgotten the occasion, but he read Hermione’s message and understood that she had thought about the difference between the time zones and sent her owl very early. It was just noon in Britain, now, and Ron would certainly send Rudy in the late afternoon, which meant that Harry wasn’t going to get it before the next day. Judging by the eagle’s uncontrollable character, he wasn’t even sure of receiving anything at all.

Hermione’s gift was, interestingly, a shrunk book about werewolves and a silver knife. Not a particularly large or adorned one, but it would fill its duty. Harry reflected grimly that it was too late for any use on the one werewolf that had bitten him, but it could prove useful later. The bushy haired Ravenclaw had also added a few pages containing personal notes of speculations concerning Harry’s state, as well as a leaflet containing the description of a spell creating a shield against someone or something. Browsing through it, Harry found that, following the intent of the caster, the spell could also reflect the spell or even absorb it.

The gift-giving session over, they settled down and tried one of them, a board game called Cosmic Encounter, offered by Jorg. In it, the players took the role of alien species trying to control the universe, with cards adding funny powers to one’s side. Harry promised not to interfere with the others’ minds, and they had a blast playing the game for a couple hours. They all laughed particularly hard when Goken tried to play the Sniveller card and failed to whine appropriately.

Around 10pm, Goken took his leave and the children went to bed, tired by the party but happy nonetheless.

Harry wasn't going to have much sleep, though.
Little Hangleton, 5pm, London time...

"Our provider has given us enough of their little devices, master." said one white-masked and black-robed wizard.

"And half of the members of the pier guards shift have been replaced by friends, master." said another Death Eater, although the voice hinted at a female one.

"Excellent!" Voldemort exclaimed, rubbing his hands in jubilation. "Gather them." he said excitedly "Gather them all."

Three hours later, the room was full. Or rather, it was as full as it could get. Voldemort looked at his most recently acquired troops and frowned. Most of them were only here because they feared him, and would certainly desert when presented against superior odds. He needed his Inner Circle badly, and that was why he had planned the whole thing. He had been extra careful not to leak anything, preferring to rely on the surprise. No traitor would be able to give him in this time.

"Death Eaters!" he exclaimed, using the most intimidating voice from the large muggle body he was now inhabiting. After all, he had chosen him for that reason.

"My faithful followers." he continued, using carefully chosen words. "We have been presented an opportunity we can't let pass. In one hour, we will march on one building, which we will exit victorious soon afterwards, and we will then thrive in striking fear in the whole world's heart."

The Dark Lord was feeling an eagerness he hadn't felt since a long time.

Little did he know that the very traitor he was searching for had been awakened by it and heard everything.

Harry had barely slept three hours, before being awakened by a first vision, in which Voldemort was feeling particularly happy at something. The next hour had been spent in a fitful rest, in fear he would miss the vision of the upcoming gathering. Deciding to wait awake, he had turned his bedside lamp on to read Hermione's notes. Learning through notes, even as detailed as Hermione's, wasn't as fast as getting the memories straight from people's minds, and Harry had tried to cast the shield spell a dozen times fruitlessly before succeeding.

That's when he had felt the tingling announcing the new vision.

He had heard everything, and that left him only a few opportunities. He jumped out of his bed and went to the message board through Apparation – it was quicker than running. Lighting the nearby lamp, he scribbled one word before Apparating out.

A few minutes later, a sleepy Jorg came out of his bedroom, wondering why the corridor lights were still on, and, yawning, he turned them off before going back to bed. He hadn't seen the word on the board.

England.

Harry hurried through the atmosphere, changing into Jerry Homest and transfiguring his clothes into something more impressive than pyjamas on the way, and arrived in Dumbledore's office with a thunderclap – Apparition sounds were directly related to the speed of said Apparation, and Harry hadn't braked before entering tangibility again.

He felt Cassie's overwhelming joy at finding him again, but pushed the feeling aside for the moment, querying her about Dumbledore's whereabouts instead. Unfortunately, Cassie only told him that the man wasn't there. Of the professors, most were on vacations, and only Sprout was there, unwinding after a long day of taking care of plants. The plump woman was lounging in her bathroom, and Harry decided not to appear, only checking her mind for information about the old Headmaster. To his surprise, he discovered that Dumbledore had left for the Ministry of Magic not so long ago, having a late

meeting with Amelia Bones. That's what the man had told Sprout anyways.

After gathering the memories of how to get there from the relaxing woman, Harry crossed space again. It was already half an hour after his last vision, which only left him with thirty minutes before the assault. He knew he would have to convince Dumbledore and Bones quickly, or they wouldn't be able to gather the necessary Aurors in time. And he also had to discover where the attack would actually occur.

Arriving near the Ministry of Magic, he remarked that the gaseous reality around the building had a hardness not unlike the one he had felt at Hogwarts, a few months ago. 'The building must be protected against Apparation.' Harry logically thought, before finding an opening in these protection, opening which led to a single room, where he Apparated.

An annoyed clerk looked at him. "It's too late, Mister."

"I need to see Dumbledore, he's with Madam Bones, it's urgent."

"I haven't seen Headmaster Dumbledore in my entire shift, Mister, and I've been there for a while." he said in a dignified voice. "And Madam Bones has left already."

Harry checked that the clerk was telling the truth and cursed his misfortune. Dumbledore had lied to Sprout, but why?

"I'm going to close the platform, Mister." said the clerk. "If you want to reach Headmaster Dumbledore, I suggest you use an owl."

An owl? Of course! Harry disappeared, and the clerk closed the Apparation platform for the night, mumbling about people's lack of forethought.

Except by stealing, Harry didn't know of anyone nearby having an owl. There was Hermione, of course, but Athina was resting in Japan right now, as he should do, were he not so pressed by events. As Harry

didn't even know any owl shop in the vicinity, he decided to go somewhere where he knew that there would be owls. He extracted a memory taken from Ron, a long time ago, and traversed space again.

It was a quarter to nine, and the sun was setting, throwing fiery light into a house inhabited by fiery headed wizards. And two equally fiery headed witches.

From the gaseous reality, Harry noticed that Ron was alone in the kitchen, munching on some unidentifiable pile of food. He Apparated in, startling his friend.

"I'm Harry." he said, and made his scar appear briefly, before turning serious again. "I need an owl."

After pausing a second to actually process the request, Ron jumped off his chair and ran in the living room where the cages for their owls were kept. "I'm sorry, there's only Pigwidgeon." he said dejectedly, taking the small and excited owl in his hands.

"No problem." Harry said, using a nearby quill to scribbling a name on a single sheet of parchment and tying it to the owl's leg.

Ron noticed his friend's hurried moves. "That bad?"

"You have no idea." Harry said gravely, before pausing. "Tell me, you know a wizarding place with guards on a pier?"

Ron thought about it for a second but shook his head sadly. "Sorry, mate."

"No bother, I'll find. I'll be back later to explain." Harry finished, before disappearing, still holding the little owl. 'I hope.' he mentally added, before hurling himself through matter again.

Unbeknownst to him, Ron was thinking exactly the same thing. "I hope he'll be back to explain." he muttered. "First, the parents disappear for no apparent reason, then he appears right here, and he-"

“Ron? There’s someone with you?” asked a feminine voice in the doorway, and Ron mentally winced.

“No, Ginny. No one’s there.”

“Curious. I could swear I heard voices downstairs, and, with Percy and the twins in their respective rooms and the parents out, I thought you were with someone else.”

“I swear, Ginny, there’s no one but me here.”

“Did you speak about guards on a pier? Or was it my imagi...” she trailed off, her gaze catching Pig’s cage, which was still balancing from the moves Ron had had to make to extract the small owl.

“Where’s Pig?” she asked.

Ron blushed, before stuttering. “I... I sent him. A message, I mean... To Hermione.” he added, as an afterthought.

She raised her right eyebrow. “To Hermione?”

He nodded vigorously, before sitting down and grabbing the first newspaper coming to his hand, mentally urging Ginny to leave. She didn’t, though, and started to giggle, before laughing outright. To his horror, he noticed that the newspaper was Witch Weekly. And it was upside down.

He threw the paper away and darted toward the stairs, his sister’s voice pursuing him. “You’ll have some explaining to do, brother mine.”

Ron quickly closed his bedroom’s door, and suddenly realized something: in his hurry, he had forgotten his half-finished plate. He groaned and slumped against his door, his stomach growling.

Five minutes later, he tiptoed his way to the kitchen and, looking around to check that no one was near, heated his meal with his Swiss

wand before downing it. Once done, he patted his stomach and went to his room. On his way, though, he noticed that his sister was waiting for him at her door.

Not saying anything, she gave him a bit of parchment and returned to her room, closing the door. Ron ran to his room and opened the folded parchment. The few words written on it brought fear in his heart.

Checked with Percy's old wizarding atlas. Guards on pier near Azkaban.
A bit earlier...

Harry decided to start his search in London, and released the little owl from a rooftop, before switching to the gaseous reality and taking off after it. It was a thin strand of luck that Dumbledore seemed to actually be in the city as the bird went directly to a house Harry recognized.

Sirius' house!

Harry almost kicked himself. He could have thought about it and gained a few precious minutes. Returning to tangibility, he snatched Pig from midair and removed the message. Lost for a second, the tiny bird turned back home.

Harry sensed a group of people inside the house, and silently Apparated behind the door before knocking. He didn't hear anything from what was said inside and supposed that Silencing charms were being used.

The door opened suddenly, and three wands were aimed at his nose, jugular, and chest. He opened his hands in a universal sign of peace.

"I have to see Dumbledore." he stated, and nodded to the old man he was seeing behind Moody, Snape, and Tonks. Assessing the room's occupants, he remarked that Sirius was feeling better, but that Remus wasn't there. There were Ron's parents too. What was going on?

“Enter, Jerry.” Dumbledore said. “Is there a reason for this late entrance?”

“Yes. Death Eaters are on the move, and will attack in...” he glanced at his brand new watch, a present from Ulrike. “Two minutes.”

That could have thrown the room in a pandemonium, but it actually stilled them, as if a cold spell had been issued through Harry’s word. After a second, Moody growled. “How can you be so sure? And how do we know it’s not a trap?”

“I am sure. And it’s not a trap. I didn’t come here to ask you to come, though.” Harry replied curtly.

“Why are you here, then?” asked Dumbledore.

“I don’t have the location.”

“Ha!” exclaimed Snape. “Are we going to list-”

“All I have,” interrupted Harry, “is a hint, and I ask you this: are there places in the wizarding world where wizards would guard a pier, and which would be interesting to Voldemort?”

They stayed silent a second, thinking about it. Curiously, it wasn’t Dumbledore or Snape who found first.

“It’s not possible.” stated Moody, but his voice sounded more worried than disbelieving.

“It is. Now, where is it, please?”

“Azkaban.” replied the grizzled Auror, eliciting a collective gasp. “But... the Dementors...”

“The Death Eaters will have special items with them. I didn’t know what they were for, but I suspect it’s to protect against something.

Can you bring the memory of the location forward for me, please? I still have friends to gather.” he added as an afterthought.

Moody was too worried to refuse and Harry helped himself before disappearing.

Several seconds later, the other members of the group recovered their wits, and Tonks asked a sentence which made them frown. “Did someone see him use a wand?”

Several questions erupted at that moment, and Dumbledore needed all his authority for them to calm down after thirty more seconds. He pointed to several of the most capable members and they decided to Apparate not far from the pier, synchronizing their jump as much as possible. No need to appear one by one to be downed in the same way.

Harry had spent the minute of travelling northward by transforming into Henry Evans, the auburn-haired and green-eyed man who had introduced Sirius and Remus to Harry Potter.

Once on the pier, he looked around and cursed his bad luck again. Visibly, the attack had started already, as a visibly enlarged rowboat was sailing toward a huge building in a distance. Still in the gaseous reality, Harry idly wondered why the assailants weren’t directly Apparating on the island. When he progressed toward the boat, he understood why. The whole island was encased in a very large and spherical anti-Apparation field, and there was no mean to pass it while intangible. Harry suddenly understood that the boat was the only mean of entering and leaving the island.

However, said boat had already passed the anti-Apparation field limit, and Harry couldn’t take place in it anymore. Not that he would have, though: appearing in the middle of thirty Death Eaters on a mission is quite a suicidal move. Harry looked around frantically, trying to find another way in. When he looked up, it gave him an idea.

Following the spherical field, he went up, up, and up, until he was on top of the prison’s highest tower. It was quite far below, but Harry could modify his mass/size ratio easily, as well as transfigure a bit of

cloth into a parachute. Doing exactly that took him several seconds, and he left tangibility again.

The freefall was quickly slowed by the parachute, but Harry hadn't counted on the wind. On top of that, he wasn't skilled in either parachute making or jumping. The direct consequence was that, not able to control a fall that wasn't controllable, he found himself stuck, his parachute pinned by the crenellations of the tower, his legs dangling over 20-yard high and sleek walls.

By using his own muscles, and applying transfiguration several times, he successfully climbed the ropes to the battlement and looked down, inspecting the situation and reflecting about it. He couldn't travel through the gaseous reality anymore, but could still hide in it. And there were those... how were they called, again? Dementoids? And Ron said that they sucked happiness?

There were too many unknowns to make it a safe fight, but Harry didn't have much choice. The boat had reached the tiny island's shore already, and the Death Eaters were pouring out of it. Harry thought about what he could do while opening his locket, taking and equipping the charmed glasses and Rowena's ring. He then got his weapons trunk out of his locket and pulled his katana out. After one second marvelling at his weapon again, he shook himself and stored the trunk back where it came. He then fished Merlin's wand out and used the spell Hermione had sent him.

“Protego.”

Then, evaluating the distance, he jumped over the railing into the inner courtyard. As he was levitating himself to the ground, he cursed himself again: he could have done so in the first place, instead of a half-attempt at parachute!

Once in the place, he tried to feel the presences of the Death Eaters, but found that there were many presences in the castle, most of them frail and deteriorating while a few of them were bored and annoyed. ‘Auror guards.’ he thought. The second presences in numbers were unidentifiable but they felt so cold that he stopped his sweep instantly.

‘These must be Dementors.’ he thought. Remembering where the presences of the fourth and last kind were, he cursed.

The Death Eaters, already in the prison castle, had separated in several teams already. Visibly, they knew where to go. He didn’t, though, and went to the courtyard exit he thought nearest to a group of Death Eaters.

Opening the door, he gasped, before slamming it shut in reflex, locking it magically afterwards. Behind it, there had been two of the dreaded Azkaban guards, clad in their long and tattered black robes. Thanks to his mind defences, Harry had merely felt their cold presence before closing the door, but he couldn’t imagine being stuck with them for a long time. Before moving on, he thanked whatever gods there were for Sirius having kept his sanity.

Going to another door, Harry felt the area just behind it, and, finding it devoid of any activity, he entered the corridor and started to run toward where he suspected the Death Eaters would be.

Five minutes later, he was cursing in every language he knew – and that makes quite a few – because he hadn’t found any. The darn prison complex was full of dead-ends and sloped corridors, making his search extremely difficult. On top of that, he had barely escaped the Dementor patrols several times. One of them, a few seconds ago, had been such a close call that he was still trembling. He hadn’t found any hiding place nearby and had decided to simply pop out, even if he knew he wouldn’t be able to move afterwards.

That’s when he noticed something unusual. The Dementors, seen in the gaseous reality, didn’t change aspect and Harry quickly returned to normalcy to retreat, his thoughts churning. Were the Dementors living on both planes at the same time?

He didn’t have time for idle thoughts, though, as, despite his protected mind, he was starting to feel the strain of so many Dementors. He made a last sensory sweep before heading out, reflecting that he could have waited for the Death Eaters on the pier itself, like what he supposed Dumbledore would do.

His sweep told him he was wrong. Dumbledore was here. Unbeknownst to him, the old man had conjured a boat and had entered the prison a couple of minutes after the Death Eaters. Now, the two groups were fighting in the prison's entrance.

Harry cursed, and started running, swearing up a storm. Thankfully, because he had made so many rounds and false turns, the entrance was nearby, and he reached it in mere seconds, noticing several teachers of his lying on the ground. Angered because of his lack of forethoughts having caused harm, and noticing a nearby Dementor going for Tonks' mouth, he charged and swung his katana in the creature's midsection.

It didn't go through. Few things could, and a sword, even imbued with magic, wasn't one of those. It did have its interest when enough strength was behind the strike, though, as the creature was flown into the air, landing in the middle of the Death Eaters' ranks.

There was a half-second of pause while everyone registered the new player and assessed its allegiance, and Harry took advantage of it to cast the shielding spell again, just in case. It barely reached his conscious mind that, not having concentrated on the hand delivering the spell, it got applied with Ravenclaw's ring... and the katana.

He couldn't explore that line of thoughts, as two Cutting and three Exploding curses were headed his way by the Death Eaters. He sidestepped two of them, and two others struck his shield harmlessly, and, seeing the fifth beam approaching, he did something foolish. Something which could have destroyed his prized katana.

He struck the beam with it.

To everyone's surprise, the beam was reflected and sent back to where it came from, and a Death Eater fell to the ground, his legs broken.

The fight was going full swing, though, and almost nobody noticed that unusual happenstance. They noticed the others, though, as Harry became a whirling dervish, his sword intercepting most of the Death Eaters' spells and sending them back in their general direction.

Dumbledore and his men could now focus on regrouping and pushing the Dementors away. Several silver-coloured beasts appeared in the large room, chasing the hooded guardians away.

Everyone knew that it merely bought them time, but it was better than nothing. The Death Eaters, having recovered exhausted Inner Circle members, weren't ready to fight the unknown swordsman, though, and they headed out, slamming the doors behind them. Harry banged them open, but the enemy had regrouped, and thirty similar shouts were heard.

“Stupefy.”

The boy tried to evade and block most of them, throwing them back to the Death Eaters by using his katana in wide strikes. He couldn't avoid all of them, though, and fell to the floor, unconscious victim of half a dozen curses. His last thought was that he was lucky to fall to that particular curse and not a lethal one. What he hadn't realized was that the attack curse was one with the shortest incantation, and thus it was easier for a group of wizards to cast it at the same time, enhancing its effect.

As Harry's body was blocking the doors, Dumbledore hovered him inside before locking them magically.

“Afraid of the confrontation, Dumbledore?” asked a loud voice behind them. “Don't worry, we will find each other soon, and you'll lose many more of your underlings.”

The aged man didn't answer, nor did he react to the subsequent shrill laugh going away, as it was true. Only a few Death Eaters had fallen to his side, and they had all been carried away by their brethren. Dumbledore had noticed several Death Eaters falling again when the unknown man had reflected the spells on them, but they had been awoken quickly while he was closing the doors. If there had been a better preparation...

As it was, most of his soldiers were on the ground, either unconscious or deeply wounded, or both. Dumbledore realized that

the bulk of Voldemort's soldiers today had been new recruits, as they hadn't used any Unforgivable. His forces had been outnumbered, though, and there was one body which wouldn't move anymore.

Peronille Fortin, his most recent addition to the Order of the Phoenix, had paid with her life her dedication to the Light side.

"Enervate."

Harry opened his eyes wildly, and found himself in Sirius' house again. He was unable to move, though.

"What's your name?" growled a Mad-Eye Moody who could have seen better days.

Harry blinked. Were they trying to interrogate him under Veritaserum? He tried not to answer the question and succeeded. No Veritaserum, then, he supposed.

"Henry Evans." he said, carefully strengthening the fake identity in his mind. He knew there were Legilimens around. Truth to be told, there was at least one, as Snape uttered the spell incantation.

"Legilimens."

After delving in his fake mind for a while, Snape retreated. "He is." he merely indicated.

"Of course he is." snorted Sirius. "Now release him."

"You know him?" asked Dumbledore.

"Well... no." answered the man, not ready to admit that it was the man linking him to Harry. "But he helped you!" he added.

"Indeed, you are right." said Dumbledore, before flicking his wand to remove the spell.

Harry looked around, and noticed that his katana was being examined by Moody. "Can I have it back, please?"

The old and scarred Auror turned his head toward him and his appreciative look faded into an inquisitive one. "What is it?" he asked.

"A sword I bought several years ago." Harry lied smoothly, not ready to speak about Japan right now. Not until he could hide his flat with the Fidelius. "I'm quite attached to it and, if you fear for your safety, I can swear not to use it here and now."

Moody looked at Dumbledore, who nodded back, and gave him the sword, which Harry tucked into his belt.

"It's not that we are complaining, but why were you in Azkaban? And how?" the aged Headmaster asked.

"You are Dumbledore?" asked Harry, buying time.

"Of course. Pardon my impoliteness. I am Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, and Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry."

"And you still manage to walk around?" asked Harry.

Several of the onlookers gasped at the man's cheek, but Dumbledore smiled, followed by Sirius.

"Why, yes, I do." the old man said, before doing a round of presentations.

"How long was I unconscious?" Harry enquired.

"If you would answer my question, I'll answer yours." replied Dumbledore with one of his benign smiles.

"I show you mine if you show me yours?" asked Harry, his own eyes twinkling. "Alright. Jerry called me."

“Jerry who?” asked Dumbledore, who knew very well the probable answer to the question, but wanted to eliminate ambiguities.

“Jerry Homest.” Harry answered. “He’s not the one for a good hand-to-hand fight, if you catch my drift.”

Dumbledore nodded. “That answers the why.”

“How did I get into it? I levitated atop it and fell.”

“You what?” asked Sirius, and the others’ amazed gazes told him the others wanted the answer as well.

“Don’t worry; I’m still alive, am I not? I used a parachute.”

“A what?”

“A parachute.” Harry said, internally rolling his eyes at the wizards’ ignorance of the muggle world. “A muggle device designed to slow one’s fall.”

The red-haired man he knew was Arthur Weasley moved as if he wanted to ask a question, but a quick glare from his wife told him not to.

“Interesting.” Dumbledore was saying. “I wonder why we haven’t thought about it before.”

“If I may...” Harry started, “perhaps it’s because, while you are known to help and protect the muggleborns, no one has ever investigated muggle technology. Parachutes were invented by Leonardo da Vinci, you know.”

“Who?” Dumbledore asked. “Where is that man? I could have a talk with him.” he added, and Arthur Weasley nodded vigorously.

“I doubt it.” Harry replied. “He has been dead for almost five centuries, by now.” he finished, his eyes openly rolling upwards.

A pause ensued, after which Harry broke the silence again. “So... how long have I been unconscious?”

“Sorry? Ah, your sleep. Well, we had to bring our wounded to St Mungo first, and find a resting place for Miss Fortin, and-”

“She’s dead?” asked Harry, guilt once again welling up at his lateness.

“Yes.” answered Dumbledore sadly. “She was hit by Voldemort just as the fight started.”

Harry nodded, incapable of speech for a second. His sensei’s words came back to his mind, though, and he calmed himself. There was a proverb which he knew could be applied here, despite being sadly worded: it’s no use crying over spilt milk.

Harry looked up, and realized that Dumbledore was saying something.

“I’m sorry, you said...?” asked Harry.

“I said you were unconscious for two hours, give or take a few minutes.”

Harry made a quick computation and realized that it was already 7am in Japan. Thankfully, it was Saturday, and he would be able to get a bit of sleep.

He thanked Dumbledore for having taken care of him, and they shook hands, before he disappeared. The few remaining Order members spoke about him and Voldemort’s recent attack for some time afterwards.

Harry went to the Burrow and, while still in the gaseous reality, found Ron in his room, pacing nervously. He Apparated in, doing only a faint noise so as to warn Ron about his presence but not the whole house. The red-haired boy whirled suddenly.

“Har...” he started, before taking in Harry’s green eyes, auburn hair, spectacles, and sword. “Who are you?” he asked, his own wand pointed at Harry’s face.

Harry smiled, before morphing back into himself, and Ron sighed. “I was too worried, Harry. My si... well... when I found out where you were going, I couldn’t sleep anymore. And... What is it with the sword?” he asked, suddenly registering the weapon.

“I fought.” Harry answered simply. “The imprisoned Death Eaters have been freed by Voldemort, and-”

There was a gasp behind the door, and Harry stopped speaking, eyeing the door suspiciously. With a jump, he landed next to it and pulled it forcefully. There was only one girl there, shivering in fright, and Harry pulled at her arm to drag her inside, before closing the door and applying several Silencing spells on it.

He then turned to the girl, wanting to check how much she did hear and remove these memories. He was surprised, though, to see Ron placing himself between them.

“Ron...” he said tensely.

“No.”

“Ron, please, you know that must be done.”

“Please, Harry. Don’t. She’s my sister.”

“Harry?” asked the girl disbelievingly, before recognizing the scar. “Harry Potter?”

And she fainted. Only Harry’s faster-than-normal reflexes prevented her from banging her head on Ron’s bed frame.

After laying her on the orange-covered bed, he looked at Ron intently. “You really have that loyalty streak we spoke about, Ron.”

The boy blushed, remembering their discussion about him almost being a Hufflepuff. "I don't want you to mess with her mind." he muttered, looked at his prone sister.

Harry huffed. "I'm not "messaging" with people's minds, I'll have you know. But I see what you want. I give you the choice, then. Either she knows all, or nothing, there's no half-measure."

"What do you mean, all or nothing?"

"Either way, I'm going to "mess" with her mind. Either I remove what she just heard, or I teach her Occlumency like I did for you."

"Isn't she too young for that?" asked Ron. "I mean..."

"You weren't that much older yourself, when you learnt it." said Harry.

Ron nodded, before looking at him. "I prefer to let Ginny decide, in fact."

Harry nodded, before pointing Ravenclaw's ring toward her. "Enervate."

The girl saw Ron first and looked at him inquiringly. "Ron? What am I doing in your room? I dreamt that I met..." she trailed off, recognizing Harry on the other side of the bed. "Harry Potter?" she asked weakly, blushing.

"Nice to meet you, Ginny." Harry said with a caring smile. "Can you tell us why you were eavesdropping?"

She blushed even more and started to stutter. "I... Ron was... I mean I heard..."

"She heard us, earlier." Ron elaborated. "But I told her it was nothing, and that I sent Pig to Hermione."

“Pig?” asked Ginny. “But he had already returned! He mustn’t have been to...” she looked at Harry and clasped a hand to her mouth. “Sorry.” she said through it.

“I used Pig to find Dumbledore.” stated Harry. “He wasn’t at Hogwarts or at the Ministry, and Voldemort was gone a-hunting.”

“Vol... You-Know-Who?”

“I Know Who, but do You?” asked Harry. “You almost said it. Voldemort.”

“Volde... mort?” she asked tentatively.

“Good!” exclaimed Harry. “We’ll make a Gryffindor out of you.” he added, smiling, and her blush reached the traditional Weasley beet red.

“Now, for the 1000-Galleon question: Ginny, are you with me?”

The girl looked at both boys, not understanding.

“If you are with me,” Harry explained, “you’ll learn many interesting things, like Ron here, the first of which being Occlumency, to hide your mind from mind readers. I have many secrets and I don’t want people to find about them just like that.” he said, snapping his fingers.

Ginny nodded, but Harry continued. “If you prefer to go your way, I’ll just remove your memories of tonight’s speech, and you’ll never hear about me again.”

The girl was clearly shocked. But there were so many questions she wanted to ask. She had never imagined meeting Harry Potter in this way, though. She self-consciously slid off the bed, smoothing her nightgown on the way.

Speaking of meeting Harry Potter, her mind gave her another thought to chew...

“How do you know Ron? I mean... You weren’t in Hogwarts, and...” she trailed off when she noticed the boys smile.

“I was.” said Harry. “But under a fake identity.” he finished, morphing into Harold Thomson.

She gasped, and fainted again. This time, Ron was closer, and he caught his sister as she fell backwards. The two of them put her back on the bed and Harry pointed the ring at her again.

“Enervate.”

Ginny looked around, and found herself with the two boys again. It wasn’t a dream, then.

Harry scolded her. “If you plan to faint each time you find something about me, Ginny, you’d better stay in bed.”

She blushed.

“How comes you were listening to my door?” asked Ron suddenly. “Your room is on third floor.”

She blushed even more, and Harry began to wonder how many shades of red she could acquire. “I was in the bathroom,” she started quickly, “and I heard you pacing upstairs, so I went up. I promise I didn’t want to eavesdrop, but then I heard you talking to someone... I heard you speak about You-Know-... I mean... Voldemort, and then you caught me.”

Despite blushing at her story, the little girl was proud to say the forbidden name, especially as Harry nodded when she did.

“Well, are you with us or not?” asked Harry.

Ron almost snorted as Ginny’s head shot up, eagerness etched in her expression.

“I am.” she said.

“Good. Now, first things first, I am going to your mind to do a bit of reordering, and I will need you there. Here is what you will do...”
The next Monday, in Goken’s dojo...

Harry arrived early, Apparating in the courtyard as usual, before knocking to the main building’s door. It opened mere seconds afterwards to reveal an agitated mentor.

“Come in, come in.” Goken said, before dragging him to his Library.

There were many scrolls scattered around, and Harry immediately thought that a break-in had occurred, but Goken was smiling to him like the cat that ate the proverbial canary.

“What is it?” asked Harry.

“When you spoke about the powers of the mind, I taught you our way of "melting into the fight," the thing you call "no-mind technique," but I remembered only recently that that technique belonged to a now-extinct martial arts school. When the school closed, the last master recorded that particular technique in a large tome, alongside many others. And guess what I did this week-end?”

Harry didn’t even have to read the man’s mind to have an idea about the answer. “Fish it out?”

“Exactly!” said Goken, putting an old tome on a nearby table. “You did tell me about walls to protect one’s mind, once.”

“Yes, it’s how British wizards do it.”

“And yet you were surprised when you found about the "no-mind" technique, which means that something is incomplete, either your books or your understanding of the topic. This one tome contains each and every technique to manage one’s mind.”

Harry began to read the book in earnest, and found several things he already knew being described in detail, while others were completely new.

They spent the next hours reading through the dusty book.

Right as they prepared to leave for the kendo lesson, Goken addressed Harry again. "Can you come tomorrow morning? I have something else I'd like to show you."

The boy nodded, and they Apparated to the Nippon Budokan before parting ways.
Tuesday...

Harry arrived early but his mentor welcomed him nonetheless, before bringing him in the sun-basked garden on the other side of the house, where something caught Harry's eyes immediately. There were a few balls of hay apparently scattered at random in the garden. Harry understood their meaning, though, when he noticed that a bow and a quiver full of arrows were waiting for him. He looked at his mentor, but the man just motioned him forward, and he picked the bow.

With Goken's help, Harry started to learn archery. Since a few weeks ago, the two of them had designed a new method for the boy to actually enjoy learning instead of just copying memories. The boy would establish a permanent channel between their minds, and Goken would push memories as needed. It forced Harry to pay attention both to the situation itself, and to the influx of memories coming from his mentor. It was still quicker than most teaching methods and, when lunchtime came around, Harry was able to shoot unerringly at any kind of target, remote ones as well as close ones, and moving ones as well as still ones. He had even started to practise shooting several arrows at the same time.

He still needed an aspirin, though.

He invited Goken to eat at his apartment and the two of them ate with the rest of Harry's family, the boy recounting his morning's lessons.

At the end of the meal, Goken surprised him again. "If you can come this afternoon too, I have another surprise." he said with a smile.

Harry looked at him, then at Tracey, whom he had promised to accompany for a movie. Seeing that the boy was torn, Goken looked at Tracey. "You can come too."

That settled it. The three of them helped Ulrike cleaning the table before being ushered out, and Harry brought the three of them in Goken's courtyard.

Once there, the man didn't head toward the main house, going to the low building on the entrance's left instead. Harry and Tracey looked at each other, but quickly returned their gazes to the building when several strange sounds emerged from it. They then had the surprise to see Goken exiting the building with two horses in tow.

The two young teens started to learn how to ride, and discovered that they liked it very much. To allow Tracey a quick learning too, Harry forked the "learning channel" from Goken, so that the girl would gain the memories at the same time as he did.

An hour afterwards, they knew everything they needed to in order to ride a horse proficiently. After having galloped around the main building a couple of times, Goken slowed the two of them down and, looking at Harry with a smirk, sent him another memory.

"Take us there." he then said, extending his hand. Even if the man was able to Apparate, he couldn't check places for people around, nor could he take someone else with him, yet. Harry nodded and grasped Tracey's hand in his right and Goken's in his left. A few seconds later, they found themselves 30 miles to the south, in a small town surrounded by mountains on three sides, and the sea to the east.

"Where are we?" asked Harry.

“The Tsurugaoka Hachiman Shrine in Kamakura,” started Goken with a wide arm motion encompassing the surroundings, “is one of the places in Japan where you can learn Yabusame, the art of mounted archery.”

Tracey, not having learnt archery before, preferred to stay to the side, watching as Harry practised said art, once again absorbing Goken’s provided memories.

‘Harry’s memory’s like a sponge...’ she thought. ‘I wonder if he will stop learning someday.’
Wednesday...

The two of them were studying their homework when Harry, looking at Tracey, had a sudden idea. A sudden idea about a thought process that had started in June.

“Trace?” he asked.

“Mmmm?” she answered, lost in a complicated Potion essay.

“What would you say if I was a Slytherin?”

“Mmm...” she started to say, before looking up, registering his words.
“What?”

“Do you see me as a Slytherin?”

She looked at him as if he had grown a second head, blinked a couple of times, before laughing hysterically.

Harry looked annoyed. “What?” When she didn’t answer, he tried to threaten her with emptying her mind, but that threw her into more peals of laughter. James and the twins, who had been playing Cosmic Encounter again, peered at the door to see what the cause of the girl’s hilarity was, but Harry shrugged.

After several seconds, Tracey calmed herself and looked back at Harry. “Harry, if there is someone who is Slytherin at heart, it is you.”

she said, raising her hands to prevent him from interrupting. "You are cunning, you are ambitious, and you definitively are stealthy, so you have all it takes to be a true Slytherin." she stated. "Sorry to say this, but you can even be ruthless, and that's part of my House's attributes." She remembered about something and shivered. "At least you aren't just ambitious like some Slytherin are. And even ambition isn't applicable to every Slytherins. I often wonder how people like Crabbe and Goyle made it into the school."

Harry smiled about her last sentence but thought about everything she had said. She was right, of course, but that didn't answer his question. "Tracey, I have had an idea when the school ended. I know that several teachers are close to discovering my identity. Sprout knows about Harold Thomson's being a Metamorphmagus, and I'm not sure her loyalties aren't with Dumbledore first. Besides, I wasn't glad that you got separated from the SAGES, and I intend to do something about it next year."

"How could you?" she asked. "The Slytherins were pretty much uptight about House divisions, and it's not like you can influence them, as you aren't..." she paused, looking at him shrewdly.

He nodded. "What would you say if Harold Thomson dropped out of school to be replaced by a Slytherin boy?"

She thought about it for a moment, and suddenly grinned. "As long as I choose the aspect and name of that boy, I'm alright with it." she replied, before frowning. "Someone will be much disappointed, though." she said, reflecting about the past year.

"Who?"

"Susan Bones." she said, and Harry nodded, not knowing what to do about his Hufflepuff friend.

Thursday...

Not wanting Harold Thomson to be linked to his new persona in any way, Harry decided to go to South America to send a letter to

Dumbledore. He knew that there were tropical birds, native of certain countries, that could be used as messenger birds, and he wanted to throw the man on a false track as far away from Japan as possible, at least until he could find and learn the Fidelius spell.

He didn't know the magical areas in South America, though, and went to Alison to ask her about them. The woman agreed to help him, and he Apparated the two of them to Rio de Janeiro. Once there, she directed him to a particular hotel in Sao Clemente Street.

"The wizards of Brazil have modernized their passage toward the magical mall," she said. "And they gain money from tourists as well."

She went to the elevators, and, entering an empty one with Harry, she closed the doors and pressed her wand tip at the first floor button. The elevator didn't move, but a door opened in its back, and Harry was ushered in a street resembling Diagon Alley. However, contrarily to the tourist-laden streets of the muggle town, there wasn't much activity here. He didn't care and headed for the local post owl office.

Five minutes later, a colourful toucan was taking off, heading to a particular office in a country far away.

Once out, Harry tried to take Alison's hand, with the clear intent to whisk the two of them away, but she stopped him. "Since you are here, don't you want to go sightseeing?" she asked.

He looked at her and thought about it. "I'd rather have my family with me, to... I mean... you are family, even more than the others, but... you seem to know the place already... and..." he stuttered, not knowing what to say.

She laughed, easing his discomfort. "I understand. However, I noticed a poster showing some kind of artistic fighting contest on the beach, and I thought you'd be interested," she finished, refraining a laugh at Harry's eager expression.

"Artistic fighting?" he asked. "What is it?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Let's check the poster."

They traced their steps back to the poster and grabbed the location and times of the exhibition. It was right now, and it was on one of the town's beaches. Not knowing all the places' names, they took a cab there and spent an hour watching the friendly competition.

That was the first taste Harry got at Capoeira, and the fight dynamics impressed him so much that he immediately thought about two things: how to mix it with his previous training in martial arts, and when he could come back to learn more about it.
Friday...

In the cluttered office, the strange and colourful bird was perched close to the fireplace, recovering from the trip in the colder climates.

Dumbledore frowned.

The letter was a bit short and, while it explained the reasons behind the Thomsons' choice, the aged man suspected that there was more to it. Did the boy find out about his teachers' suspicions? 'I'm getting paranoid.' thought the Headmaster, before reading the letter again.

Dear Headmaster,

I'm really sorry my son Harold can't continue his schooling at Hogwarts despite the school's untarnished reputation. I have been professionally displaced to Rio de Janeiro, in Brazil, and Harold and I agreed that it would be interesting for him to continue his schooling under other methods of tuition. On top of that, my son has recently caught an illness and our physician's recommended cure is to move him, more or less permanently, under warmer climates.

Thank you for your understanding, and for having cared about him for the elapsed year. Please don't take this withdrawal as an attack on your competent and committed staff.

Yours truly,

Georges Thomson

PS: Harold told me you used owls to send mail, but the local post office only had toucans. I hope it will find the way. If you want to feed it something, I've been said they eat fruits and insects.

Dumbledore sighed. Was it necessary to send someone after them? His numbers were already low because of their last run-in with Voldemort, and it wouldn't be good to send any of them away right now.

He was in that state of thoughts when a large beetle entered the room through the window. The toucan's eye registered the insect and it took off after it, but the beetle transformed in Rita Skeeter in mid-flight and the reporter fell on the ground in a rather undignified heap.

At the same time, there was a knock at the door, and Snape entered. The black-clad man was clearly agitated, but when he saw the woman on the ground, he froze.

Apart from the toucan circling the room, clearly upset about having lost an opportunity at a juicy lunch, nobody moved for several seconds.

The first to move was Skeeter. She stood up suddenly, and smoothed her dress before sitting in a chair facing Dumbledore, thus turning her back at the Potion Master. Dumbledore then snapped his fingers and a house-elf appeared.

"Yes, Headmaster?"

"I'd like a bowl of fruits, please."

"Hanky is fetching a bowl of fruits for the Headmaster." the diminutive creature answered before disappearing. Snape was approaching Dumbledore's desk when Hanky reappeared, holding the required bowl, and Dumbledore put it on the desk. The toucan ceased to fly around and landed next to it, throwing an inquiring gaze toward the aged man. Dumbledore took a pear and gave it to the bird, which ate it greedily.

Wiping his hand on his robes, Dumbledore looked at Snape. "What can I do for you?"

"I have a guest I'd like you to see." answered the man. "Privately." he added in a whisper.

"You know, Severus, Rita works for us, now."

The man grumbled his disapprobation, before voicing it. "I don't trust her."

"Severus, my dear boy," Dumbledore started, ignoring the anger flashing in the man's eyes, "there has been a time when people didn't trust you either."

Snape, who had been opening his mouth to retort, shut it suddenly. After a second, he opened it again. "He still doesn't trust me." he accused, referring to Moody's well-known animosity toward him.

"And I don't think you'll ever trust her." countered Dumbledore. "But I do. And I think you could be convinced, too."

"What do you mean?"

Dumbledore turned toward the reporter and Snape followed suit. The younger man then noticed that the woman's expression, which would have been ecstatic at digging a disagreement between him and the Headmaster, only registered boredom.

"Rita, do you agree that professor Snape reads your mind?"

She shrugged. "As long as he doesn't gets too far."

Snape's gaze went from one to the other repeatedly before he drew his wand. "Legilimens."

A few minutes later, the man was satisfied, but upset at the same time. "How is that possible?" he asked. "All these years, you have been dragging people in mud, and now you work for Dumbledore?"

She nodded, and frowned. "I have been presented with a choice. And I chose to help Dumbledore. The other alternative was unpleasant. That's all I remember."

"By who?"

"As I told you, I don't remember."

Dumbledore looked at Snape. "Is the meeting with your guest urgent?"

Snape hesitated. "Well... not really. I guess he could wait for..."

"A hour." the Headmaster answered, and Snape nodded before leaving.

When the door closed, Dumbledore looked at Skeeter. "So... what have you found?"

The people who were discussed about by Dumbledore and Skeeter were presently recovering from their ordeal in Malfoy Manor. The building had so many enlarged and hidden secret chambers that it was possible to host everyone while still presenting a spotless and empty house to Ministry inspectors.

The evaded Death Eaters were feeling better and better. There were still cases of unredeemable insanity, though. Antonin Dolohov, for instance, had forgotten who was who, and he stayed prostrate most of the time. He was the worst case, though, and the other escapees could still do their job as Death Eaters. Bellatrix Lestrange, for her part, was giggling nervously at random moments, and Lucius Malfoy, despite having only spent a comparatively short time in the wizarding prison, couldn't produce a smile anymore. Not that he smiled much before, mind you, but he wasn't able to smirk either, or sneer, scowl, or any of his usual facial features.

The ones having recovered the quickest were the two Lestrangle brothers. Unbeknownst to most, Rastaban and Rodolphus Lestrangle had travelled the world several times before associating with Voldemort, and the two of them had learnt skills that could only make the other Death Eaters jealous. Thanks to their focused mind, they had escaped most of the Dementor's tortures, and their ability with swords allowed them to recover their physical ability by working out a good sweat several times a day. The other Death Eaters looked at them with incomprehension, preferring to lie in their beds, waiting for their recovery and sipping potion after potion.

One Death Eater looked at them with interest, though. Bellatrix Lestrangle, née Black, knew that once the two of them were strong as before, they would start their erotic games with her again.

She giggled.

Skeeter didn't know all of these details, though. She only reported visible things, and told Dumbledore that the Malfoy Manor had a surprisingly large number of house-elves for only two inhabitants. As such, it was plausible: the house was big and needed many servants to clean it daily. However, as she had entered the house by the attic, Skeeter had remarked that the house wasn't thoroughly clean, and that it was because most of the house-elves were working at the kitchens, conjuring and cooking food as if for a ravenous battalion.

Dumbledore thanked her before giving her another spying mission. Just before leaving, though, she asked for his permission to send another article to the Daily Prophet. He looked at the proposed article and, as it was really factual and completely unrelated to Skeeter's spying missions, he acquiesced.

When the Animagus beetle took off, this time unconcerned by the sated toucan, Dumbledore thought back about the journalist. Like Snape, he hadn't understood why she presented herself to him, several weeks ago. She had been quite meek, something that clashed with her usual behaviour and, like the Potion Master, he had prodded her mind without finding any hidden motive. It seemed that her story was true and that someone imposed the change on her.

How could anyone have turned her that far away from her previous ways? And why?

He shook himself awake, before leaving his office. Snape had a guest waiting.

As the Headmaster entered his Potion Master's quarters, the two occupants rose to their feet, hands flying to their wands.

"Easy, easy, Severus..." Dumbledore said, before looking at the other man in surprise. "Igor?"

Igor Karkaroff looked at the older man and extended his hand, smiling nervously. "Dumbledore. It has been a while."

The three men spent an hour discussing about recent events before Karkaroff left in the darkness of the night, escorted to the wards' edge by Snape.

Returning to his office alone, Dumbledore's thoughts were steering toward Harry Potter again. His peripheral Legilimency had told him that Karkaroff was truthful, even if he didn't want to reveal his sources. Dumbledore knew about Harry. He knew about the Dursleys. He knew that Harry's middle name was James.

What was the name Calder doing in the picture?
The next Monday...

The day was one of feasting for several countries of the world. It wasn't Christmas or any holy day. It was simply the day of athletes returning to their country after the Olympic Games. The Japanese athletes had brought home more medals than they did the last time the Games were held, at Seoul. Despite having won less gold medals than then, they were quite happy. Concerning the martial arts, two gold medals and one silver had been won by Japanese judokas, and the Nippon Budokan was reserved all day for their welcoming party.

Goken and Harry took advantage of this to train the boy with his other weapons. Using standard Iaitos that Harry enlarged or shrunk

appropriately before transfiguring their shape, they trained with the tanto and wakizashi, first as only weapons, then together, before switching to the longer tachi and the even lengthier nodachi. The longer swords were awkward to use at first, but Harry's increased strength allowed him to use them proficiently after a few fights with his mentor. In the evening, Harry spent an hour on a horse back, slicing through fruits with his long swords. At first, the horse was going slowly and the fruit was impaled in a wooden shaft held by Goken, but things heated quickly when his mentor asked him to gallop and started to move the shaft wildly for a few passes, before squarely throwing fruits at him, even two at a time.

'Thanks Merlin for the Cleaning Charm.' Harry thought before heading home.

Once there, he took dinner with everybody and recounted his busy day. James followed suit, retelling the ceremonies around the Budokan where he had spent the afternoon with Ulrike. While everyone chatted amiably, Harry noticed something unusual. During all the meal, Jorg was throwing strange looks at him.

After dinner, they went to the lounge to... lounge for a bit. The twins started a game of cards with James and Tracey, and invited Harry, but the boy looked at Jorg and declined before going to his bedroom. Not ten seconds later, Jorg entered after him and closed the door behind him.

"What is it?" asked Harry from his sitting place on the side of his bed.

"I went to work today." answered Jorg. "I was quite alone in the building, as people were out for the athletes' welcoming parties, so I started to configure my account. I never have time to do that when people don't stop heaping me with tasks. So, I was there, configuring my mail account properly, you know? The system that allows people using connected computers to send and receive data through the connection."

Harry nodded, and the man continued. "As soon as I entered my full name in the system, I received one. One mail, I mean. It was strange,

and I almost deleted it, but then I remembered about what happened to you in Switzerland, and I preferred to print it instead.” he finished, extracting a folded sheet of paper from his pocket. Harry took it and started to read it.

From: copycat (a) u-tokyo. ac. jp

The first line made Harry’s eyes go wide and his heart beat stronger. He looked up, but Jorg motioned him to read further.

To: gthomson (a) u-tokyo. ac. jp
Subject: Do you know Harry?

Hi Georges

You perhaps don’t know me, but if you have a "special" Harry near you, I’d be glad to be re-acquainted with him. I hope he remembers about me from the CERN.

Copycat

Harry slumped on his back, breathing hard.

“I checked the IP address of the machine sending the mail, and it was the university’s main server.” Jorg started to explain, before becoming thoughtful. “But it’s not possible as, even if select people can have a console on the machine, there’s no mailing software installed. And the sender’s address doesn’t even exist in the university directory – not that it would prevent anyone sending a mail with it, though.”

A chortling sound interrupted him and he looked up. The sound grew louder as Harry laughed harder.

“Harry?” asked Jorg.

“He’s alive!” exclaimed Harry, jumping on his bed as if it was a trampoline. “You understand, Jorg? He didn’t die!”

Jorg looked at the ecstatic teen in wonder. “Who?”

“CopyCat!”

“I already understood that part. Who is he?”

“He’s...” Harry started, before stopping, sitting back on his bed. Looking at Jorg, he hoped that the man would understand him. “He’s me.”

The next morning saw Harry following Jorg as the man returned to his work at the university, Harry disguised as an old man with Japanese features so as to be as inconspicuous as possible. They returned to the man’s office and Jorg turned his computer screen on. There, on one of the consoles, the message was still displayed.

Harry sat at the man’s chair. Having gotten the appropriate memories from him the evening before, he now knew how to use the mail software, and he quickly sent a reply to copycat. Checking the account immediately afterwards, he noticed that there was an answer already. He opened it.

From: copycat (a) u-tokyo. ac. jp
To: gthomson (a) u-tokyo. ac. jp
Subject: Test

Hi Harry

I’m sorry if it’s you, but I have seen an awful lot of Harries around the world, so I will test you a bit. I need a top500 kind of machine to operate fully, so please telnet cm5-32. medlab. u-tokyo. jp 25 (the 25 is to pass their firewall – crappy thing, btw)

Copycat

Harry looked at Jorg inquiringly, and the man opened another shell window to type the requested command. As soon as it was done, text started to appear on the screen.

“Hi, Harry. I’m glad to meet you and I hope it’s really you.”

“Hi, Copycat.” Harry typed back.

“For my test, I’ll only ask you who I am and when I was born.”

“You are me. You were born on May 8th, 1991.”

A -very- short pause. An infinity for electricity.

“I’m SO pleased to meet you, at last.” the screen displayed.

“Yeah, me too. I have been wondering about you for a long time.”

“Same here.”

And, under Jorg’s surprised gaze, the two copies of one mind recounted their recent history to each other. A few hours later, Copycat told Harry that the technicians of the medical lab where he was operating wanted to see why their star computer was so slow, and they said their goodbyes. When Harry left the building afterwards, he was thinking about means to contact Copycat while at Hogwarts. That afternoon, Harry told Goken about the hide-and-seek kind of game he was playing with his Headmaster. The man frowned for a second, before admitting that it was actually useful to hide one’s talents. He agreed to act as Harry’s father for the upcoming year, and the boy returned home to write the letter for Dumbledore. He then made a quick trip to Switzerland to rent the most oriental-looking bird of the owl post office there.

When he returned, Harry took one of his notepads and sat in the lounge, scribbling things at random. His chat with Copycat had left him with several ideas concerning his mind, and he was writing a few of them down. While doing that, he suddenly sensed James approaching from behind, apparently wanting to scare him.

“Who’s there?” the younger boy asked, claspings his hands over Harry’s eyes.

“I don’t know, Emma?” Harry said in a playful voice, referring to Eva.

“No.”

“Kathleen?” Harry asked, thinking about the other half of the twin sisters.

“No!” said James indignantly.

“Tracey?” Harry asked, almost plaintively.

“Nooo!” exclaimed James, starting to be annoyed by his cousin’s lack of cooperation.

“So, by logical deduction, and since there’s no adult to play that, I infer you must be the esteemed Jason.” Harry said, sending his arms behind him to tickle his cousin. James fell down, laughing, and Harry turned around and winked at him.

James spotted the notepad and became serious. “What are you doing?”

“Err... I write things about... you know, homework.”

James looked at the drawings intently, before jumping to his feet suddenly. “Wait here.” he said, running to the room where he and Jorg had their computer and other electronic thingamajigs. He returned mere seconds later, quickly turning pages in a thick book. Harry barely spotted the title – data-related algorithms – before James put the open book on his lap.

“You have computer homework in your school?” he asked, pointing at a diagram.

Harry was stomped. The diagram and his drawing were similar, only differing by the terms used. The diagram showed "data" where he wrote "memory" and "checksum" instead of his "summary."

His drawing had been an abstraction of Snape's mean of checking his memory integrity, and yet such means already existed in computer software! Harry rifled through the book and found many other diagrams depicting interesting things to do with data. Or memories. Compression and encryption particularly caught his eyes, and he looked at James in wonder.

"Can I borrow it? I mean..." he started, wanting to say that he would like to keep it. Given the complexity of certain diagrams, he would need a long time understanding the entire book. And he couldn't extract the memories about it from James' mind because it wasn't to be used on the same kind of data.

"Well, I'm reading it right now." started James. "That's why I remembered the checksum algorithm."

"Do you know where I can buy one, then? I'm going to use it while at school, and..."

"You have computers in your school?"

"No, but... I intend to use it on something else."

The younger boy seemed to think about it for a few seconds. "Jorg and I mainly go to Shinjuku to buy stuff, but I saw computing stores in Shibuya and Kichijoji too."

Harry looked at his watch. They still had time, and he stood up, heading to his room. "Let's go, then." he said as he threw his notepad on his bed. The two of them went to the board, and Harry wrote "Shinjuku, back soon –Jason and Harry."

Already knowing where the mall was, he grabbed his cousin's hand and Apparated there.

When they returned, fifteen minutes later, James was still exuberant. "It's great! You always do that, but I never knew what it was like. It's nice, and you can go far. Can you go far?" he asked, but didn't wait

for an answer. "That was great! Two seconds from here to there! I can't believe it."

The rest of the family looked at the pair inquiringly, and Harry shrugged. "I just took him to Shinjuku and back. I wanted a computer book." he finished, indicating his shopping bag.

"You know, Harry." started Jorg. "Apart from Jason here, and Tracey, of course, you never showed us what you could do."

Harry blushed and thought about it for a second before darting to the phone. After magically silencing the doorway, he had a very quick chat with somebody and returned to the lounge with a large grin.

He was opening his mouth when Tracey interrupted him, pointing at the doorway behind him.

"What?" he asked.

"The spell."

"Oh, right." he said, before turning back. "Finite Incantatem." he said, effectively cancelling his Silencing spell.

"If you agree, I'll take you on a short trip."

"How short?" asked Tracey, having a vague idea of Harry's speed.

"You'll see. It's a surprise." he answered. "Make a circle and never break it until I say so." he instructed, and they obeyed, holding each other's hands. Harry had never taken that many persons with him, and concentrated harder than usual to bring all of them in the gaseous reality.

"Wow." was little Eva's only word before their grey apartment moved under them. Or rather, they moved across it. They looked afraid when they crossed their first wall and their first outside window, but Harry was leading them and they followed. Harry then sped, only pausing to

get his bearings right. And, twenty minutes later, they arrived in their old house in Switzerland.

“Surprise!” Harry said, once the circle had safely arrived in their old dining room. Genevieve was there, and she had invited Mustafa, and Fatima over as well, and they all hugged while Harry sat down, recovering.

To say they had an interesting meal afterwards would be an understatement.

The next day...

To the Headmaster of Hogwarts,

I am very interested in providing top education for my son and have given him private instruction from tutors, until now. Several wizards and witches have told me that your school is the finest and I hereby request if you could allow him to be transferred. If you would see us and test him to determine the year he can enter, here is our address: Goken Dojo, Aoyama district, Tokyo, Japan.

Sensei Goken

"May you live in interesting times."

Dumbledore turned the crisp letter around. Taking exchange students wasn't rare, but they were seldom coming from other continents. He was puzzled by the proverb at the end, but supposed that it was a Japanese custom and let the matter drop. However, if the prospective student wanted to start school in due time, he only had a few days to prepare. He grabbed a parchment and his favourite quill, and scribbled an answer.

The white and black bird that had brought the message had gone immediately afterwards, and Dumbledore suspected that it was a post office bird. The Headmaster decided to send his reply as quickly as possible, and, foregoing the tired bird, he chose Fawkes instead – His knew that his "pet" phoenix could travel almost instantaneously everywhere in the world. After writing said reply and sending his fiery messenger with it, he went to his own fireplace to call for McGonagall

and Snape. If he wanted to test the future student's knowledge – which was, incidentally, the way it was done with all students except those coming from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons – it would be better if they went together.

Thursday morning...

“It's the last time I step in their awful office!” the man grunted.

The woman smiled. “Come on, Severus, aren't you going to come back?”

“You know what I meant! Never again will Albus convince me to trip half the world and back. Especially through the dirty international network.”

“It's true that the Bering passage was a bit unclean...”

“Unclean? I swear no one uses it! It had so much dirt that we had to stop at Vladivostok to clean ourselves. And, since we arrived there anyway, why didn't we go through Russia directly?”

“You know why, Albus told us.” answered McGonagall. “Since their muggle revolution, their network is even worse. Albus said he had been stuck in Siberia once and that hadn't been a pleasant environment to find oneself stranded in.”

“What do you think that Russian Floo officer wanted from us? He spoke about a prison and-”

Whatever he wanted to say got drowned out when McGonagall opened the outside door. They were greeted by the loudest noise and the most incongruous scene they could imagine. People were dancing in the streets!

“Do you think they are doing this for us?” asked McGonagall, disbelief evident in her voice.

Her colleague didn't answer, and she noticed that he was red at the face. 'Probably building an anger.' she thought. 'The poor boy we are going to see won't stand a chance.'

The man calmed himself enough to extract a charmed map of Tokyo from his pocket and consult it.

The map was a courtesy of the Japanese international Floo access they had just exited. They hadn't noticed it, but said Floo access had been installed by American wizards after World War II, not by native wizards. Only occidental wizards used it. Which meant Asian-American wizards as well, judging from the Floo operator's features. However, since there has been no attempt from the occidental wizards to understand the customs of the Japanese people, and because of the occidental Secrecy laws, there hadn't been any wizard encountering the magical Japanese as such. Until Harry.

On Snape's self-updating map, there were several highlighted dots which could serve as Apparation targets. They were normally located in recesses and calm streets. However, almost no point was showing up as free right now. 'Probably because of all these muggles.' thought Snape, angering himself again. 'If the boy isn't good, I'm going to repaint his house with his internal organs.'

Little did he know that said boy was watching him intently right now. The previous afternoon...

The two samurais were sparring in the courtyard once again, the swords flashing and clanking against each other. They had switched to using their own magical swords, knowing that a mere fight between them couldn't damage their strengthened blades. The magical blades had a set of interesting properties as well, one of them being to sharpen or unsharpen at will. For their sparring contests, not wanting to actually lose body parts, they had unsharpened them. They could still be deadly, though.

Harry was getting stronger and tougher, and he was able to keep moving in an accelerated time frame for a longer time now. That forced Goken to use several tricks to keep the upper hand. Several times, the older samurai had moved faster himself, or had tripped and

recovered his balance miraculously. There was even times when Harry was sure that his opponent was at one place and he got attacked from elsewhere, using short-lived but well-timed illusions. As his mentor was applying his no-mind technique, it was very hard to discern where the attacks would be coming from.

Each time his mentor was forced to use one of these tactics, he explained it to Harry, and the boy learned it and how to block or evade it efficiently. That afternoon, Harry was fighting with all his spirit, when his mentor applied a new trick and Harry found himself fighting two blades, one wielded by Goken while the other, the man's wakizashi, was hanging by itself in the air. When Harry blocked it the first time, he noticed that it wasn't as strong as the weapon held in the man's hands, but it was hindering his concentration nonetheless.

In the heat of the fight, a burst of flame surprised the two men and they positioned their weapons toward the intruder threateningly.

"Whoa! Calm yourselves, humans." the bird squawked.

Harry looked up in disbelief. "Fawkes?"

"Yes, it's me." trilled the phoenix. "The one and only fast mail carrier between England and here." he added in mock sadness, and Harry laughed.

Goken looked at the two of them inquiringly, before sheathing his katana, sighing. "You always surprise me, Harry." he said, before turning toward his dojo. "I'm going to take a shower; I'll leave you with your talkative friend."

"Sensei, wait!" Harry asked. "It's Dumbledore's... I mean..." he quickly corrected himself. "Fawkes here gives Dumbledore the honour of being his human companion." He then turned toward the bird, sheathing his own weapon as he did so. "Am I right?"

"Too right, youngling." answered the phoenix in surprised notes, before landing on his shoulder, his leg extended. "My... companion human, as you so eloquently put it, has a message for a Sensei

Goken living here. As the man called you Harry, I suppose it's not you but him?"

"You'd be right." said Harry, before taking the message even so. "Can you stay for a second?"

"I'll stay for a moment, yes. It was a long trip and I'm a little tired myself."

Harry gave the message to Goken and looked at Fawkes intently. "What do you mean by "long"?"

"I travelled for half an hour. It's a dozen times longer than my usual trips."

While Goken unrolled the letter, Harry looked at the bird with a shrewd look. "Are you too tired to "travel" in the same way from here to... say the other side of the courtyard and back?"

"No. Why?"

"I'll tell you afterwards." said Harry, before disappearing. Once he was in the gaseous reality, he saw Fawkes appear there as well before speeding toward the end of the courtyard and back. When both of them returned to tangibility, Harry was smiling widely. He didn't have time to explain about his previous request because Goken was showing him the letter.

"He agreed." he stated. "Two examiners are coming tomorrow morning."

Harry nodded absently. Since long-distance Apparation was very tiring for regular wizards, and impossible if they didn't have the slightest idea of where to go, he suspected they were coming through the international Floo network. He remembered the local access point from Alison's last visit and decided that he would wait for them there.

“I’ll come early and establish our mental connection. Each of us warns the other when they come. You remember how you wanted to welcome them?” Harry asked.

The man acquiesced, a wide smile on his face. “Don’t worry. I know exactly what to do. Do you?”

“I do. I think they’ll be impressed.” Harry said with a smirk, before turning toward the fiery bird. “Ready to meet the one and only cargo carrier between here and England, Fawkes?”

“What do you mean, youngling?”

“You’ll see. Hold tight.” the boy answered, before disappearing.

A pensive expression on his face, Goken looked at the place where the boy had been standing with the bird, before shaking himself awake. With a smirk of his own, he walked to his dojo.

He really needed a shower.
Back to the present...

Snape and McGonagall had tried to use the muggle contraption that was called "metro", but it was so much of a culture shock already that they couldn’t even find the entrance to the tracks. Besides, they had none of the locals’ money, and were at a loss at how to get some.

They decided to walk.

An hour later, they arrived in front of the dojo gates, and Snape was already in a right state. The man didn’t enjoy crowds or physical activity, and he had had both. Walking through crowds could very difficult, even when one was helped in that endeavour by an angry sneer mixed with a contemptuous scowl.

Not used to push buttons, they prepared to knock on the door but, to their surprise, it opened before Snape’s fist could make contact with it. As far from muggle technology as they were, automatic portal

opening wasn't something they were familiar with, so they thought it was magic.

The two of them looked at each other and shrugged, before entering.

The courtyard was desert, and the gate slowly closed behind them. They started to worry about the trap-like set-up, and Snape extracted his wand. In front of them, the main building's door opened by itself as well, and they advanced slowly, until they arrived at the entrance of the dojo's main training room.

It was a large room, with sliding paper panels on which Japanese symbols were painted in black and red. Several oriental weapons were displayed on the walls, but what caught their attention was the man sitting on his knees in the middle, his back to the door. And they completely missed the boy next to them because of that.

As if they weren't there, Goken drew his weapons in a swift yet graceful move and started to move.

It was one of the most complicated katas, involving both a katana and a wakizashi. The man started to attack and defend against invisible opponents, slashing left and right, jumping right and left. The only sound that could be perceived was Goken's naked feet touching the floor.

After the first reaction of surprise, the two occidental magic-users were impressed and, at the same time, at a loss about what to do. They thought that the man was crazy, and were still under the impression that they had landed in an alien place. Snape reacted first and, in his unsurprisingly polite manner, raised his wand and slowly aimed at the man, a spell on his lips.

Harry stopped him, putting his hand over the black-clad man's wand.

Snape jerked suddenly, whirling to face Harry, who wasn't even looking at him but at his mentor. McGonagall, surprised and bumped out of the way by Snape's sudden move, started to fall backward but grasped the side of the door to straighten herself.

“Don’t interrupt.” Harry said, still not looking.

“And why, pray tell, shouldn’t I interrupt a madman playing with swords?” asked Snape.

“He’s not playing.” merely answered Harry, before looking at the man in the eye. “And it’s my father you are calling a madman. I should ask reparation, but you don’t even have a sword.” he finished, eyeing the man up and down.

“You think I don’t know how to hold a sword?” whispered the man dangerously, his eyes promising danger. Snape was on edge, and anything to lessen his anger would do. Even a sword fight with a young kid. In his folly, though, he hadn’t taken into account the boy’s father.

McGonagall gasped when Goken finished moving. Snape blanched and suddenly didn’t move anymore. Harry’s mentor was stone still, not even breathing hard, his katana tip right under Snape’s jaw. “Are you threatening my son in my own dojo?” he asked in perfect English – Harry having taught him the language in the morning.

“Err...” was all Snape could produce at that moment.

“He only implied to be proficient enough in swords, father.” Harry said offhandedly, as if holding a katana under one’s jaw was an everyday thing. “He told me you were a madman, and I asked retribution. Can I?” he asked, suddenly looking up.

“No.”

“But, father...”

“I said no. I don’t want you to have blood on your hands yet.”

Harry pouted. “Pity.” he said, to McGonagall’s shock.

“Besides,” Goken started, looking at Snape intently, “he insulted me.”

A pause ensued, during which Goken lowered his sword.

“Pick your weapon.” he said to Snape.

The Potion Master looked at him, his grip around his wand tightening nervously. There weren’t many options...

“Not your magic stick. You wouldn’t have lifted it halfway that you’d be impaled by this.” stated Goken, having seen the man’s move and showing his wakizashi. “Choose a weapon here. A sword, if you want. Or something else.”

Snape looked around. There were many choices. Used to handle more occidental swords, he picked the one which looked the more like it. It was straight, despite being sharpened on only one side.

“ Ah. A chokuto. Nice choice.” commented Goken, who had positioned himself in the middle of the room. “Now, for a lowly insult like that, first blood will be enough.” he continued, and bowed.

Snape tried the sword and, satisfied, went in front of the man and bowed as well. When he went into position, his eyes went wide. The man was holding... a fan?

He hesitated.

Goken waited, smirking. That infuriated Snape even more, and he attacked.

Dumbledore’s office, a few hours later...

“So, you’re sure that the boy is proficient enough to be included in second year?” asked the old Headmaster.

“Yes.” said McGonagall, nodding, before elbowing Snape.

“Yes.” he said reluctantly, and it was true. After McGonagall had grilled the boy on several topics, he had even used Legilimency on him to confirm the story, and found the appropriate memories of private tuition about the topics taught at Hogwarts. And some not. He shivered, the memory of the fight with the boy's father still fresh in his mind.

“Why are you holding that handkerchief to your cheeks?” asked Dumbledore.

Snape looked at McGonagall, but the woman's look clearly showed that she wouldn't help him there. He lowered his tissue, and Dumbledore gasped. There was a newly-inflicted scar there, barely healed as the two of them had just returned from Japan using Fawkes. Despite being happy of having his phoenix back, Dumbledore had wanted to know about his staff's mission.

The old man sighed and sat back. “What have you done?”

“What I have done? That madman-” Snape started, but got interrupted by McGonagall.

“You are starting again.” she scolded him, before turning to Dumbledore. “He called “madman” a very proficient swordsman, and...” she started, and Dumbledore's eyes started to twinkle a bit more than usual. “And I don't actually have to tell you what happened. Except that the man is very touchy, and his son might be as well.”

“Any guess for a House?” asked Dumbledore.

“I don't know, but I hope not mine.” Snape grumbled.

In the corner, Fawkes trilled. That would be an interesting year, indeed.

To be continued in next chapter: A Slytherin's Job...

Though the hairy beast is dead,
Another has rear'd its head.

There still will be hell to give,
For Harry to really live.

PART 3 – With Friends Like That...

This part comprises chapters 18 to 25 and covers Harry's second year of education.

Chapter 18 – A Slytherin's Job

posted October 15th, 2005

The Buddhist holidays called Obon continued until its usual closing day, August 16th. Many people participated to the traditionally associated dance festival – which was the reason why Snape and McGonagall had found so many people outside when they had arrived, incidentally – and to the informal ceremonies of placing candle lit lanterns on the rivers nearby, praying. It was a time to honour the departed spirits of one's ancestor.

Harry wasn't Japanese, nor were his parents, but he and his family had been immersed in the cultural environment enough so as they didn't feel awkward when participating. He placed his own floating lantern on the river as well and, watching the flickering light heading off, he thought about his biological parents and vowed to finish the job of destroying Voldemort.

It was a decided Harry who entered his family's apartment afterwards.

"Everybody," he asked when they had all found their usual relaxing place in the lounge, "I have something to say." He paused to have their attention before continuing. "I will return to England soon. I have to. I mean..."

"Don't fret, Harry." said Vernon, walking to him and patting his shoulder. "We all know you have things to do."

"Right. That's true." the boy answered. "School things to buy, friends to meet again."

"Speaking of friends, what about Tracey?" Vernon asked, looking toward the aforementioned girl. "Not that I'm complaining since she's an adorable guest, but have you asked her?"

Tracey smiled and nodded, and Harry smiled too. "We already talked about it, and we'll live at her place unless we're elsewhere. She already put her address and phone number in your directories." he said, his arms gesturing toward all those who had one. "We already sent a message to Ron and Hermione, who you know about as well, and we will meet them at some point."

"Good. I see that everything is set, then." Petunia said. "You will take care of yourselves, won't you?" she asked, and when Harry nodded vigorously, she sighed. "That was what I've been afraid of."

Her smirk was a giveaway of the good-natured nature of her comment, and all of them laughed about it.

"When are you leaving?" asked James, who had approached during the talk.

His cousin's tone of voice told Harry that he was quite sad, and he opened his arms for James to hug him. "Sorry, but I leave tonight. I really have much to do."

They stayed like this for a minute, before being disrupted by the twins. "Hey Kath," said the first, "I always thought boys didn't hug."

"You're right," answered her alter ego, "they mustn't be boys, then."

When the two boys separated, red-faced, they chased the impertinent girls and everybody laughed again, easing the tension.

A few hours later, Harry and Tracey had finished packing and were having dinner with everyone.

"You keep my game." Harry told James, referring to the board game they had learned to like. "I don't think wizards would be so taken by it." He then looked at everyone. "I have to leave Quicksilver here, too. I'll take my snakes, but the falcon is too recognizable."

He had informed them about his will to change identity again. "We will take care of him." said Eva, and Maureen nodded seriously.

“Thank you.” said Harry, and they embraced him.

“Hey!” James exclaimed. “They get to hug you and I don’t?”

Maureen turned and poked her tongue at the boy, but Eva had another idea. Jumping off Harry’s neck, she lunged at James, yelling “So, you want a hug?”

James yelped in fright and tried to escape her, but failed lamentably and a tangle of arms and legs fell on the floor, between the good-natured laughs of the others.

When Vernon helped his son up, the boy sighed dejectedly. “Girls!” he said, bringing another smile to the adults’ faces.

Harry hugged James again. “Thank you,” he said, “for having shown me the book. Remember which?”

James acquiesced, remembering their incursion in Sinjuku a few days before, and he squeezed Harry tighter.

“Don’t worry.” Harry continued. “I’m just a few minutes away, am I not? You have Tracey’s phone number as well, and Quicksilver can also be used, should you have to send me urgent letters while in school.”

James nodded again, swallowing his tears, before finishing the one-armed hug in a more manly way. “Take care.” they both said at the same time, and it raised hilarity again.

Harry and Tracey finished their goodbyes, going through many more hugs and a few more tears, and left soon afterwards. They had a last stop before leaving the country, and paused at Goken’s dojo, where the man was preparing the next school year agitatedly.

“I swear,” Harry started, Apparating in the man’s office, “if that’s the way our own Headmaster heads his school, he’ll soon need a replacem-”

He stopped, as a tanto was thrown at him, and he picked it up from mid-air with an expert hand move.

“Nice to see that the reason for my lateness in school preparations hasn’t lost what I taught him.” the man grumbled, before going through his files again.

Harry blushed. “I’m sorry, I-”

“I know, Harry.” Goken said, looking up. “But it was my decision anyway, so…” he trailed off, looking at their clothing. No bag was visible since they had shrunk them before leaving, but they had an air of finality to them which told him the reason for their visit. “You’re leaving, aren’t you?”

They nodded, and the man hugged them as well. They had already told him about their plans, and he already had Tracey’s address and phone number. They assured themselves that they’d stay in contact and, after more farewells, the two preadolescents left the country.

They still had another stopover before England, and arrived in Switzerland shortly after 3pm, local time. Harry then headed toward the Pets and Supplies shop, but didn’t find any bird that would pass as typically Asian. Disgruntled he almost bought a rather grumpy owl when he remembered something. With an interested Tracey following him, he returned at the post office from which he had sent his last message to Dumbledore.

The black and white bird was still there, and Harry inquired if the bird could be sold.

“Aye, me lad. Bar once this summer, none use ’im since we got ’im.” answered the man in a thick brogue. “Dunno why, thou. T’is an alright birdie.” He then looked at Harry appraisingly for a second before speaking again. “It’ll cost ya a couple of Galleons, m’boy.”

Harry nodded, and gave three gold coins to the man. “The third is a payment for closing your mouth about this.” he said, and the man

nodded. However, Harry noticed the interested glint in his eyes and used a bit of peripheral Legilimency to discover what he intended to do.

To his shock, the man wasn't dripping the honesty one could expect from a post office agent. His favourite activity was reading private mails and sometimes whisking parcels away. In itself, it was a grave fault, but not really justifying more than being fired. The man, however, was regularly sending his most interesting findings to a group of white-masked and dark-robed wizards. Harry decided to put his two Knuts in for the furtherance of a fine society, and he wiped that attitude from the man's mind. After five minutes, the man was now a pinnacle of honesty, and the two teens left the shop with the bird while the man was contemplating the three Galleons and two Knuts on his counter, wondering about what had cost that much.

The bird was a bit on the thin side, and Harry, having extracted the bird's species and regimen from the post office's agent at the same time he reprogrammed it, took advantage of the Pets and Supplies shop again. The bird – of which the Latin name *mergus squamatus* sorted in the category of mergansers, or sea ducks – was mainly eating small fishes and larvae, and Harry bought enough of these to last for two months. He would then see if his new pet could feed himself by Hogwarts' lake or not. As soon as they left the shop, Harry gave the hungry bird a helping of fishes which disappeared quickly. He then asked Tracey's advice, and they decided to call the bird "Scales" because of the scale-shaped dark grey marks on its sides, a trademark of its species.

Their next scheduled stop was in muggle Geneva, where they would drink tea with Mustafa and Fatima. Genevieve had excused herself, being swamped by work again. A fortnight ago, Hermione had left Geneva after two weeks spent with her, and the girl's inquisitive mind had given the scientist several new ideas. Some of them couldn't be applied now, because they implied magic, and Genevieve was spending a large part of her time trying to justify, scientifically and economically, the acquisition of a neutrino detector and its installation on the lab's roof, where all her colleagues knew nothing would be detected.

Harry and Tracey then finished their journey by landing in Tracey's house. After checking all doors and other openings, they collapsed in Tracey's queen-sized bed, too tired to set the guest room properly. The next couple of days were a whirlwind of activity, as Harry and Tracey settled themselves in the empty house, the girl finally going through her parents' stuff. They had been killed so brusquely that everything had been left in place, and Tracey hadn't touched anything in the short time she had spent there since the beginning of the year. The water, gas and electricity had been cut off, and Harry and Tracey made a good use of water-conjuration and heating charms. The Cleaning charm helped as well, and Harry even had to use Merlin's wand to cast it on the fridge, since the smell wouldn't have left otherwise. It raised the question of how Tracey had eaten in the week she spent there, and she admitted having nibbled on snacks. She had been too depressed to care. It raised Harry's anger again, but she calmed him by asking him how he wanted to show himself to Diagon Alley.

"Show myself?" he asked.

"Yes. You don't want to be seen as Harry Potter, and we both know it's too early to be seen as your new persona. Do you have an intermediate one?"

He thought about it, before answering. "I might have one or two, but they are known by several people. Jerry, especially, even if Henry's last stunt might have left something imprinted in a few more peoples' mind."

"You could be that distant cousin you said you told Snape about, you know?"

He thought about it and nodded, before concentrating. A couple minutes later, a strongly built 7-foot tall man was standing in front of her, smirking.

"You don't do things by half, do you?" she asked, smirking back.

“What do you think?”

“It’s impressive, but it’s also difficult to look at you up there. Can’t ungrow a bit?”

He concentrated, and lost a foot in height.

“Better.” she said. “And still impressive.”

He smiled. “As a supposed foreigner, I have to show strength if I don’t want to be targeted by pureblood bigots in Diagon Alley.”

“Come on, come on.” she answered playfully. “They aren’t all that bad.” she finished, referring to her Housemates.

“Some of them are.” he said, and she nodded, understanding that he wasn’t speaking only about the students, now.

After a pause, he looked at her. “Ready to go?”

“Ready.”

He took her hand and they disappeared, heading for the muggle side of the Leaky cauldron.

A few weeks earlier...

“Ron!”

The addressed boy looked up from his dinner plate, and blushed. As usual, he had started to eat as soon as he had been served, and his mother was looking at him with a dark glare. He swallowed his mouthful and mumbled “Sorry.”

“It eez no problem, really, Molly. Max and Amaury used to do it all the time.”

The person speaking was Soizic Creac’h-Prewett, Molly’s sister-in-law through the late Fabian Prewett. After her husband’s death, she had returned to her house near Saint-Brieuc, in Brittany, with her two

young sons. She had also dragged Elizabeth Bennett-Prewett there, because the pregnant woman had been too much in shock to take care of her daughter at that time. Fabian and Gideon Prewett, Molly's brothers, had died together while fighting Death Eaters during Voldemort's first reign of terror.

Once a year, since Voldemort's demise, the French woman had started inviting the extended family for a week. It brought the cousins together and, since they all were magical, they discussed school and played Quidditch. Even Bill and Charlie had come, taking time from their job. Max, too, had obtained a week-long leave from his Quidditch team, the Korrigans. He and Amaury were Soizic's sons, Max being Charlie's age and having graduated from Beauxbatons, while Amaury was still studying there with Suzannah, Elizabeth's daughter.

And, of course, Ron had stuffed his face again.

"That's our Ronniekins!" said Fred, slapping him in the back. Much to Ron's discontentment, the twins had started "teaching" him and Ginny the fine art of pranking. And it meant that Fred was always sitting next to him at meals, often leading to uncomfortable situations when the mischievous teen was slipping a prank candy or spice in his food.

Ron wasn't much of a prankster, and wasn't appreciating his "lessons." He disliked even more being the twins' target, so he grumpily complained, unlike Ginny, who played along quite joyfully. His sister already had mischievous tendencies which could put the twins to shame, and had even pranked them back successfully a few times.

Ron loved his aunts and cousins. Despite being younger, he now had spent a whole year in school, playing Quidditch, and he made conversation with them easily. He played a couple of chess games too, but Max won them. The young man had introduced him to the game a few years ago and was a wizarding chess champion in the making. The ten cousins also played Quidditch on the field nearby, where Charlie and Ron fought valiantly for the snitch. Charlie had

spent the year tending dragon, while Ron had been trained and had a superior broom, and the younger one won.

Afterwards, they talked a bit more about school, and the older Weasleys laughed good-naturedly when Amaury, sporting a bright red blush, admitted "seeing" a girl in school, named Fleur. Despite laughing, Percy was blushing too, and, prodded by his siblings and cousins, he also admitted having a girlfriend in the person of Penelope Clearwater.

For Ron, inexplicably, his most difficult time in France was the meals. Croissants in the morning were a good thing, but why didn't they give him the customary bacon? And why did they have to be complicated to the point of needing two different sets of silverware?

Wednesday, August 19th

It was morning and Diagon Alley was quite full, something Harry and Tracey attributed to the forthcoming school year. Harry had received his list from McGonagall some days ago, and it included a wand – once again – as well as the other items on Tracey's own list. Ollivander being in the farthest corner from the entrance, they started by doing the shops, filling an enlarged shop bag with everything.

When they arrived in front of the bookstore, they noticed an unusual number of people inside. More often than not, books were the bane of students and they darted out as soon as they bought them. Today, though, the store was full to the brink, and not only by students. A large number of adults, most of them witches, seemed to wait for something as well.

With his taller shape, Harry noticed a group of redheads and told Tracey that the Weasley were there en masse, before heading there. On his way, he noticed a few other well-known heads, among which a bushy-haired, a blond, and a light brown plait.

“Tracey!” yelled Ron when he spotted the approaching duo, attracting the attention of a few people around. He frowned. “Where is-”

The red-haired boy was interrupted by an announcement made by Mr Blott, the store co-owner.

“ He’s ready, now, ladies. Please welcome... Mister Gilderoy Lockhart!”

A large number of people clapped as Lockhart appeared, and Harry refrained from laughing outright. The man’s robes were the most striking combination of colours ever allowed in public, mixing lurid pink with deep plum highlights, and he also had a lavender cloak and hat. On said hat was a large feather of an animal that Harry couldn’t place, and he felt Tracey nudge him.

“What?”

“ It’s a peacock.” she said, and they both smiled as the man removed said feather from his hat in a flourish, putting it in the inkwell nearby. He then shed his cloak and hat, revealing his perfectly coiffed hair. While several witches sighed, Tracey groaned. “I wish I had that sort of hair.” she commented, when Harry looked at her inquiringly. She didn’t elaborate, though, and he let the matter drop.

As Lockhart started his book autographing session, the crowd thinned a bit, and the students returned to the shop’s usual activity: grabbing books, pay, and flee. It amused Harry and Tracey to see the Weasleys being stranded by their parents not moving out. Mrs Weasley was in the line for autographs, and Mr Weasley was in deep conversation with Mr and Mrs Granger, who had accompanied Hermione.

Speaking of the devil...

Hermione was red-faced by exertion, carrying more books than she should to the counter, and there was an opportunity that a certain blond-haired boy couldn’t miss. As Hermione couldn’t look where she walked because of the books, Malfoy tripped her successfully, and books fell all over the aisle.

“That’s why Mudblood shouldn’t be allowed in Hogwarts.” he said. “They are too clumsy. You are too clumsy. I’d rather see you- oof!” the boy exclaimed, as a rather strong man passed beside him, sending him crashing in the nearest shelf.

“Are you alright, miss?” asked Harry, knowing full well that the girl wouldn’t attack Malfoy, even in retaliation. He started picking her books up, and held his hand to her so that she could stand.

Smoothing her dress, she looked at him inquiringly. “Do I know you?” she asked.

“I don’t think so.” he answered. “It’s the first time I’ve been here, after all. I’m American.”

“Thank you.” she said, smiling.

The books picked, they started to walk toward the counter, ignoring the Malfoy heir in the way.

“Hey!” he exclaimed. “I’m here, you kn- aaargh!”

“Oh, I’m sorry, my boy.” said Harry, removing his large and heavy foot from the boy’s. “Truly sorry.” he added, before leaving him jumping in place, holding his foot.

Hermione followed him to the counter – after all, he was carrying the much-prized books. “Are you sure I don’t know you?” she asked. “You look familiar.”

“Perhaps it’s because I’m a relative to some student you know?” offered Harry, before calling Tracey over.

Hermione looked at them both and nodded, registering a slight familiarity in their traits. However, the man’s twinkling eyes reminded her of something else... shaking herself awake, she paid for her books with the money her parents had changed in Gringotts earlier and then stopped, wondering about how to carry them. Even though she had an untraceable wand, she knew the students weren’t allowed

to do magic during the summer, and thus she wouldn't do that in plain view of everyone.

Tracey looked at her for a second, before giving her the shopping bag she was carrying. "Here." she said. "Put them here and I'll give them back to you later."

"But... it's too small!" protested Hermione.

Tracey's eyes acquired an amused twinkle of her own. "Ever heard of magic?" she asked, and the bushy-haired girl blushed.

They were quickly joined at the counter by five red-headed Weasley children, Percy holding a large pile but the others holding only a few books from the used section. When Hermione looked at the small piles, Ron shrugged. "We already pass books to each other," he explained, "so we only have to buy those which changed in the curriculum."

As Ginny didn't know Hermione and Tracey, and as his brothers only knew them by sight, Ron then proceeded in making the proper introductions.

"Are you done shopping?" Harry asked Tracey.

Ron looked at him. Like Hermione, the man seemed to recall something but he couldn't place him. Apart from being a self-proclaimed second cousin to Tracey. "Not quite." he answered. "We still have school robes for Ginny and Potion supplies for all of us."

"And Knockturn Alley to visit." said Fred. His twin brother George nodded, while the two younger Weasleys winced.

Percy was incensed, though. "How can you even think of going there?" he asked. "Only dark wizards go there!"

"Excuse me." Harry butted in. "Are dark wizards the kind of which kill people?" he asked.

“Exactly!” exclaimed Percy passionately.

“Does that mean that we should imprison or kill anyone who goes there?” Harry enquired.

Surprisingly, that shut Percy for some time. The twins looked at Harry in wonder, and he turned toward his "relative."

“I saw your expression earlier, Tracey. You want to tag along with them?” asked Harry, and she nodded vigorously, looking at him as if asking for his permission. He chuckled. “Of course you do. Is it alright with you?” he asked the others, who acquiesced as well. “Alright, alright.” he said, raising his hands in defeat. “I can take a look around by myself. I will see you at the ice cream parlour I couldn’t help but notice on the way down. It was nice meeting you.” he said, before leaving.

After paying for the books, the Weasleys took Tracey and Hermione out on the street, dragging their parents as well. Molly Weasley looked sad to have had only one book to autograph – an old copy of the man’s autobiography – but her husband was happy to continue chatting with the Grangers, who were following their daughter as well.

Ron wanting to take a look at Quality Quidditch Supplies, the shop selling brooms and Quidditch-related accessories, they made their next stop there before heading towards the other end of Diagon Alley. As they were passing the bank, they got called by someone. “Ron! Hermione!”

Susan Bones was running after them, her own shopping bag full of books in hands, and her aunt in tow.

“You know where Harold is?” she asked when she arrived closer.

They looked at each other before shaking their head. “No, sorry. Why?”

“Because he hasn’t written since July!” the Hufflepuff girl exclaimed. “We have been writing to each other, but he was always vague about his whereabouts. And guess what I learnt thanks to Aunt Amelia? He left Hogwarts! Dumbledore came home a few days ago, and he asked if I knew about him having moved permanently to Brazil. Brazil!”

“So that’s why...” Tracey said, trying to defuse the situation. “In his last letter, he said that he would sell his falcon because it wasn’t fit to live where he was going, and he didn’t know how much time it would take to buy another bird.” she said, and paused for effect. “He didn’t tell where he was going, though. Brazil?”

Susan nodded, her sadness evident, and Tracey’s heart went for the girl who had befriended a fake boy’s image. The Slytherin girl would have a stern admonishment to make to Harry next time she’d see him. “Do you want to shop with us?” she proposed, and Susan looked at the assorted group of people. Thanks to her aunt being present, she had only been slightly harassed by Malfoy in the bookstore, but she still felt she would be better with friends, even if they were from other houses. She acquiesced, and followed them to Gambol and Japes, the joke shop toward which the twins were heading anyways.

Mrs Weasley had just enough time to snatch Ginny before she entered the shop. She excused herself to the others, saying that Ginny had to get school robes, and that it could take a while to do them. The two red-haired witches left then, going to the second-hand robe shop nearby, while her husband and Amelia Bones were intently listening to the Granger’s retelling of how a muggle car worked.

At the same time, a shocked boy got out of Ollivander, two stores down the road.

Harry had gone to the Apparation Point of Diagon Alley and disappeared, only to reappear in a dark recess near Ollivander’s wand shop, under the gait of a nondescript boy. He had then, once again, been subjected to the task of trying wands. This time, however, he had taken care of shielding his magical reserve beforehand, so that only a short amount was available. And it changed the wands’ reactions. Instead of feeling attuned to each and every wand the old

man proposed him, he saw some of them completely inert, and others even rejected him.

“Strange... most strange...” the old man was saying when Harry tried his forty-seventh wand, idly wondering if he should release his magic a bit to find at least one wand. “I usually find one’s wand in a dozen tries, no more. Only rarely did I...” he trailed off, before looking at Harry inquiringly. The man then left to his back office to come back with only one wand.

“Holly and phoenix feather,” he said, putting it on the counter, “eleven inches, nice and supple. An unusual combination.”

Harry grabbed it, and instantly felt elated. Repeating the move, he saw golden sparks erupting from the wand’s tip.

“Most strange...” repeated the man, before shaking himself. “You see, this wand has the particularity of sharing its core with another.”

“Another?” asked Harry.

“The phoenix that gave the tail feather for your wand gave another for another wand. I remember each and every wand I sell, and the other wand owner did great things, yes. Terrible yet great.” the man grew silent, and Harry took advantage of this to feel the man’s peripheral thoughts.

What he saw brought a strange feeling. Voldemort’s wand was brother to this one? He almost threw it back on the counter, but the man had tried almost fifty wands to satisfy him, and that one felt particularly good, even with Harry’s voluntarily limited magic. The wand in hand, he lowered the shields around his magic reserve a bit, and noticed that the wand’s response was even stronger.

After a thoughtful pause, he filled the appropriate forms and paid the required amount, before leaving. Expanding his senses slowly, he sensed Tracey and his other friends nearby. He decided not to embarrass Ginny by looking around while she was trying clothes, and

he headed for the joke shop instead, aware that very few of his friends know him in his new guise.

There, he noticed Susan's crestfallen expression, and mentally asked Tracey about it.

'She's sad not to have news about you.' she replied through the same channel.

'About me?' he asked, not seeing the reason. After all, he had written to her several times during the summer. He just couldn't do it anymore, since Harold Thomson wasn't going to actually exist anymore.

'About Harold Thomson, you prat. You'd better befriend her again when you'll be in Hogwarts!'

'I know, I know.' he answered. 'But how can I do that while being a Slytherin? I mean...'

'I know what you mean, but be sure to think about a solution, because she's nice enough not to treat like dirt.' she said, before turning away from the mental conversation. The object of their discussion was talking to her and it was difficult to hold a discussion on two fronts at the same time.

Harry decided to pass the time by looking at the different joke products. Hermione was with Tracey and Susan, trying to cheer the Hufflepuff by reading from a book of practical pranks and their results. Ron was having a heated discussion with Percy about responsibilities, and the twins were... on each side of him?

He grasped the twins' intent and almost laughed out loud. Instead, he waited for the right moment and crouched to do his shoelace. Two sets of colourful paint arced over him and hit each twin in the face. Still playing the innocent, he left them in their surprised position and headed toward the Quidditch-related joke items.

Shortly afterwards, Ginny entered the shop.

“What have you done?” she called to the twins, who were in a corner of the shop, trying to remove the magical paint. That got the others’ attention and the two blushing twins – it still showed through their unpainted ears – mumbled something about a failed prank.

“A failed prank?” asked Ron in disbelief. “Since when do you fail pranks?”

They looked down, and Tracey smirked, knowing that Harry was involved somehow. “Or perhaps it didn’t fail.” she said and the others looked at her. Harry, overhearing her and sensing what she intended to say, escaped the shop quickly. “Perhaps you’ve been pranked back.” she deadpanned.

They looked at her with wide eyes, and the effect was so comical that they all laughed. Even the sad Susan and the stern Percy. The twins then rose to their feet and looked around the shop. “The door!” said Fred, lunging toward the slowly-closing door, closely followed by his twin. “He’s escaping!”

They arrived outside, only to be greeted by a red-faced redhead. “What have you two been doing again?” demanded their mother angrily. After all, knowing Fred and George, faces painted green and blue were indicating that troubles had occurred.

“But... we’re innocent!” they said at the same time.

Molly glared at her sons, and they recoiled. “This time.” added George in an effort to appear even more innocent.

The woman’s eyes went as wide as saucers, though. “This time? This time? Does that mean that the other times, you weren’t?”

The two of them looked down, beaten. While they listened to the heap of punishment they would endure until September 1st, they both glared at the smirking boy on the other side of the street.

An hour afterwards, everyone was sitting at Fortescue’s eating their content in ice creams, when Harry appeared again with the shape of

Tracey's relative. To everyone, he introduced himself as Harvey Jefferson, Californian wizard, and computer engineer for the Muggle world. He knew that the Weasley elders would report him to Dumbledore, and took care of using Josh's surfer slang and a few of his cousin's computer terms to complete the illusion. It raised Arthur Weasley's interest, of course, and led him onto a discussion with him about computers. Fortunately, he had had enough discussions with James to know what he was talking about – even though the red-haired man didn't know anything in computers to detect discrepancies.

After finishing their ice creams, they exchanged addresses and phone numbers – for those who had one – before separating.

Once alone, Harry and Tracey looked at each other. There was one more stop the girl couldn't avoid eternally, and they entered Gringotts, the wizarding bank.

The roller coaster ride for the vault number 490 took a couple minutes, and they arrived in front of the vault door, into which Tracey inserted the key. After a deep intake of breath, she turned it.

Like in some other vaults, there were piles of money on the floor. She hadn't known, though, that there would be a large desk with papers on it. With Harry's help, she started to sift through them and, reading through one of her great-grandmother's journals, came to an interesting development.

...I am one of the last magical members of an old pureblood family, and I sometimes thought it was better that way. After all, Father did disown me when I married Lars. When I became Mathilda Werner, more than a century ago, he told me that marrying muggles was a blow to the blood, and that my children would be retarded or squibs.

It happened.

None of my children could wield magic, and I started to settle on living as a muggle. After all, I never had much raw power myself. And I wouldn't have survived the power struggles and political feuds that my pureblood Father couldn't live without. The Prince family had

always been good with the mind arts, and Father loved messing with people.

When Tracey was born, I was happy to have lived enough to see my great-grandchildren. Lars has died during the first of what the muggles call World War and, since then, I have always celebrated a new life while waiting for mine to end. Apparently, I have just enough magic in me to keep me from dying. Or do I have a Destiny to fulfil?

Whatever the case, I was stunned to hear about young Tracey's accidental magic events, and it made me think. Would she be considered muggle-born or was she the heir of a magical family, my family? After several years of digging into History books as well as the purebloods' ancestry and family trees, I came to a conclusion Father wouldn't have liked. Nor would the current purebloods, with their holier-than-thou attitude.

Prior to Hogwarts Founding, wizards and muggles used to live together, in relatively peaceful harmony. The organization of the magical world brought resentment from the muggle power in place, and they tried to get rid of us, and that's why we separated. Even then, wizards and witches continued to marry Muggles. And pureblood couples often had children out of the wedlock as well. The real pureblood bigotry started in the early 1300s, and these families acquired temporal power that way, intermarrying children of other magical families.

They couldn't see in the long term, though, as it now appears that descendants of these families are fewer and fewer, and less and less magical. I stumbled upon an old hag once, and she told me – over a few unholy liquor flagons – that she had often been "invited" by purebloods to check the magical power of a future child, and to interrupt the pregnancy shall the foetus not be powerful enough. And the hag's mother and grandmother had the same job. Disgusting. If that's the only way for purebloods to guarantee that they will have magical children, I shudder. And it sheds a light onto why there has been fewer and fewer children recorded as belonging to the "old and pureblood" lines. Noble and Most Ancient? Let me laugh.

My conclusion – and I welcome anyone challenging it – is that magical blood doesn't diminish in power when it comes into contact with muggle blood, unlike what my father told me. Sooner or later, it strengthens it! The most powerful wizards and witches are pureblood because they rule the wizarding world, but the most magically powerful children are almost all half-blood, some of them even muggleborn!

Speaking of them, I'm sure that, with the appropriate research, these so-called muggleborn will find a magical ancestor in their family tree. And, the farther the magical ancestor, the more powerful the child will be. It's as if the blood reinforces itself before admitting its magical ability. Since we are in the realm of hypotheses, let's press another one forward: I'm sure that, if we hadn't completely shut ourselves from the muggles a millennium ago, the magical children would have thrived on the face of Earth.

My sister Eileen was much younger than me, since we're separated by almost 50 years – sometimes, you can thank magic for life's little surprises, sometimes you don't. When she got her own son, I didn't know about all this, but I was wondering, so I spied on them. Eileen had inherited Father's resentment toward me somehow, so I couldn't do much more than look. She didn't seem to have inherited his pureblood bigotry, though, because of her marriage with that muggle fellow named Tobias Snape – Father was dead, at that time. Anyways, after a few years of watching the wizarding world from afar, I noticed that young Severus was quite the powerful boy, despite exhibiting some pureblood attitudes himself. Damn these Slytherins! Even though I was one, I never understood how they could spread the same stories over and over again.

Harry and Tracey looked at each other, shocked, before smiling widely. The papers accompanying Tracey's great-grandmother's journal were the family trees of the pureblood families, with all the squibs indicated. Several of these had also been investigated by the old woman, especially when a magical descendant appeared somewhere down the line. These, always called muggleborns, didn't actually seem to come from thin air, apparently. Without saying it, both teens knew that the news would be a fatal blow to a few tendencies in the current wizarding society, a rampaging Dark Lord's

in particular. They gathered the papers in a case which Harry shrunk, and, promising to return later, they left the vault.

After exiting the corridor leading to the vaults, Tracey got stopped by a Goblin. "Miss Davis, would you come with me, please?" he asked, before trotting away at her nod.

Hurrying after him with Harry in tow, she couldn't fathom why she was needed. "Why?" she asked, suddenly fearful that the papers they took from the vault should have stayed there.

Still advancing, the Goblin looked at her. "Durtak has heard of you being here, and he required your presence, that's all I know." he answered.

"Who's Durtak?" asked Harry.

The goblin stopped at a door and knocked three times before opening it. Harry noticed the sign on the door and found his answer. "Never mind." he said to the goblin.

"Ah! Tracey Davis!" the portly Goblin said, standing, before smiling and motioning toward the chairs in front of his desk. Noticing Harry, his smile faltered a bit. "And you are?"

"Harvey Jefferson." Harry answered, before taking a seat himself. "I'm taking care of Tracey before she goes back to school."

Durtak looked at Tracey but she nodded and he gave in. "I'm Durtak." he said. "And, if Goltar didn't tell you, I work for the Wizards and Witches Inheritance Management service. Miss Davis, I would like to express my condolences in the name of my brethren for the tragedy that struck the Prince family you belonged to."

She nodded, and he arranged his papers a bit before continuing. "Through muggle lawyers, we have finally finished investigating all the members of your extended family, back to your great-grandmother who had a vault here. Since you were there, I guess she gave you the key?"

“Yes.” she answered. “I mean... it was vault 490, sir.”

He nodded too, and continued to read. “Barring muggle taxes, as single survivor, you inherit a few properties in-”

“I don’t want them.” she interrupted in a barely controlled voice, and Harry put an arm around her shoulders. She had too many memories of visiting some of her relatives’ houses, and she didn’t think she’d be able to go there without suffering.

The Goblin was going to make a mark on the parchment, but Harry, still holding Tracey, interrupted him. “Can we see a list of these houses?” To Tracey, who was looking at him inquiringly, he justified. “Do you know all of them?”

She thought about it and shook her head while the goblin handed a piece of parchment over his desk.

They looked at the list and opened wide eyes. The Goblins hadn’t done things by half. Tracey’s extended family hadn’t been particularly rich, but most of them had owned their houses, some even having summer houses in far places.

The list contained sixteen properties. Her parents’ was near London City, as well as two other houses and a large flat, the latter being near Hyde Park and the only property still mortgaged. Eight other houses were located in other towns in England, and the remaining four were a farmhouse near Tipperary, in Ireland; a fisher’s house north of Frederikshavn, in Denmark; an old miner’s house in the suburbs of Liège, in Belgium; and an apartment in Figueira da Foz, in Portugal.

Tracey looked at the list in dismay. What was she going to do with so many houses?

Sensing the girl’s doubts, the Goblin spoke up. “If I may be of counsel, I advise you to keep all of them for the moment, and you’ll decide later, with the appropriate financial advisor. The only one we need to

see about now is the one for which a credit is underway. You can sell it, or even buy it.”

Tracey knew that the flat in Kensington belonged to her stuck-up Aunt Isabel, but had never visited it. She had a faint smile at the knowledge that her least favourite Aunt, always ridiculing people about their lack of financial resources, didn't even own her own house. “Buy it?” she asked.

The Goblin then told her about the money part of the inheritance, and Tracey's eyes went wide once again at the sum. Between the assets and life insurance of the different members of the family, she inherited a jolly dozen millions pounds.

Harry and Tracey discussed mentally for a while, but she agreed to follow the Goblin's advice for now, and to keep all the properties. After signing the load of paperwork, a still stunned Tracey left Durtak's office, her "minder" still in tow.

That Thursday, the two of them worked on Tracey's skills with Occlumency for a short time, before branching off on Apparation – Harry not having given her his whole memories about the travelling ability, back in Japan. The girl, like Goken before her, used a couple aspirins afterwards.

The two of them visited Hermione the next day. She brought them up-to-date with the research she had done about werewolves and anti-Apparation mobile fields, the latter related to Genevieve's work. Harry then checked that the girl's mind was as protected as ever, which was the case. Hermione knew that her mind was paramount for success in her studies, and took great care of it.

After the rather studious morning, they spent the rest of the day relaxing, catching up on what happened during the rest of the summer, and enjoying one of their last days of vacation.

The day after that one, Harry and Tracey Apparated separately toward the Burrow to verify the girl's ability. Harry had already remarked that the girl was able to Apparate well but, like Goken, couldn't change her speed once in the alternate reality. Witnessing it again brought a frown on Harry's face. Was it another unique talent of

his? For instance, he already knew that his impressive Legilimency powers couldn't be shared completely. He had tried to teach them to Tracey once, but she was only able to use them with a wand. He reflected about it and remembered several things which couldn't be duplicated or completely removed, like Voldemort's influence. He had had to send it to a book, and suspected that the werewolf's influence was going to be the same. "Copyright Protection" was the expression which came to his mind then, originating from a discussion with James.

Once at the Burrow, Harry looked around. As it was Saturday, the Weasley parents were doing their weekly trip to the market in Ottery St Catchpole, the nearby settlement. Ron had been warned of Harry and Tracey's arrival by owl and was waiting for them with Ginny, while the twins schemed in their room, as usual. Percy was outside, writing some letter Ron had no idea about.

The four children greeted each other, before going outside, meeting Percy in the process. Sitting beside the nearby pond, Harry replicated the visit to Hermione with Ron and Ginny. It was more arduous, though, as Ron was sloppier with his mind than Hermione was, and Ginny hadn't had much experience with it. They then spent the whole morning reinforcing these before going back inside for the meal. Mrs Weasleys had already seen Harry as Tracey's minder and didn't mind preparing one more plate. Her answer to his thanks was that, if there was enough for seven, an eighth meal wasn't much to make. With a pointed look to Ron, she then added that the saying was true even if one of those already seated was eating enough for four.

After lunch, Ron and the twins wanted to play "pass the Quaffle" with Percy, but the boy refused, saying that he had to finish writing a letter. That got several replies asking why he was writing so much, and he retreated to his room with a Weasley blush. Harry noticed that Ginny was heading toward the stairs as well, and he asked why she wasn't playing, and that elicited another blush, but she didn't flee, looking at her brothers with a strange expression.

"But... she's a girl." said Fred.

“And she’s too young.” George followed.

Despite being prodded by the twins, Ron his mouth shut. He knew his sister quite well, after all. Ginny already had a Fred-and-George kind of mischievous streak a mile wide, and was closer to him in age, which labelled him as most probable target. Despite, now knowing about Hogwarts, Ron knew that the twin’s reasons were fallacious at best. He, Ron, had started playing Seeker at Ginny’s age, and there were girls in Quidditch teams. When he said so, it earned him a twin glare, but his sister’s hug and their guests’ nods reinforced him in that belief.

They then played a true pick-up game of Quidditch, instead of just passing the quaffle. True, there were only two Chasers and a Keeper per team, but they had fun anyway, and the twins were forced to revise their judgement about Ginny’s frailty. To their surprise, she then admitted breaking into the broom shed and flying by herself since she was seven. The twins’ judgement of their sister evolved some more and they smiled at each other.

Harry and Tracey returned home tired that night, but happy about their friends.

In the final week before school, the two of them visited Tracey’s numerous properties. On each of them, they generously applied Cleaning charms before packing the previous owners’ personal belongings in one inside-enlarged suitcase.

All in all, and despite the magically locked doors, each house was left in a clean state, as if it could be sold the next day. When Harry told her so, once, Tracey frowned thoughtfully before answering that it was a good idea.

In the process of popping in and cleaning the houses, they found that the one in Leeds had seen the visit of burglars, and they ousted the squatters before transfiguring some debris into sturdy doors which they locked as well. They then Cleaned the interior but found nothing of value remaining in whatever rubble was still inside. Writing the house state down, they continued their tour, heading north towards Newcastle-upon-Tyne and the seaside cottage nearby. Since it was

the house closest to Hogwarts, they decided to leave it as furnished as it was, and dropped the other suitcases there. They would have a lot to sort, later. They didn't forget to lock it, though.

Since they were using magic to clean, lock, and pack the different houses, they succeeded in taking care of the eleven England properties in four days, and they treated the other four in three days as well. Magic was doing wonders, and Harry's Apparation method was helping them greatly.

Harry still wanted to learn the Fidelius charm, but didn't know where to start. When he had visited Hermione, he had asked about it, but the Ravenclaw girl didn't know anything about it either. Harry had smirked, then. For Hermione to admit she didn't know something was a feat in itself. That's why he wasn't worried about not knowing the spell yet: he was sure that Hermione had given herself the personal mission of finding about it, by now.

Once all of this was done, they left to Newcastle to rest for the last couple of days before school.

Upon packing his school trunk, a few days later, Harry checked his locket's content and found something on which he hadn't laid eyes upon since he got it: Merlin's book. Storing it back where it came, he vowed to take time to read it later.

September 1st

The train station was, as always, a hubbub of activity, and the Hogwarts Express platform followed the tradition. In the ruckus, the students boarded the train, some catching up about the summer, while others looked around. Each year, the graduates left for good, except for some of them accompanying their younger siblings or cousins or acquaintances to the platform. And each year, new heads could be witnessed as the train loaded its customary load of first year students.

That's partly why the new Harry Potter didn't raise much suspicion from the other students. He played along as well, doing a good impersonation of a first year, while reassuring those who were

worried about entering the great school for the first time. Not wanting to be noticed by anyone as someone close to Harold Thomson's friends yet, he also spent the train ride in a compartment full of first years. He had an open mind channel with Tracey anyways, and knew that the whole group could defend itself. Malfoy tried to be his usual intolerable git, but found the door magically locked, something which infuriated him to no point.

Harry made the boat trip once more, able to watch the revealing castle again. He was readying himself to receive Cassie's usual greeting of a shower of images, but it didn't come. Reflecting that it was because of his changed identity, he brought his own to the surface, and the castle reacted immediately. Cassie had always witnessed his changes of identity before, and the castle's consciousness knew that Jerry Homest, Harry Potter, and Harold Thomson were the same person. She now knew another facet of him and Harry was sure he could have felt the castle's amusement. Cassie also knew that these identities were secret and, even if nobody had asked it from her, she wouldn't say anything about them.

The first years were welcomed, as usual, by a stern-looking McGonagall, who, upon noticing Harry among them, nodded to him, and he nodded back. They then entered the large room under the whispers of the older students, and Harry saw his second Sorting Ceremony. It wasn't much different than the first, but he couldn't very well say so, so he practised his impressed look while looking around. After a while, everyone got sorted – Ginny joining her brothers in Gryffindor – and only Harry remained. McGonagall paused, and the students wondered about the newcomer's name. What could come after Zulthan in the alphabet?

"Tonight," started McGonagall, "we are welcoming a transfer student from Japan, who will join the second year curriculum. Mister Kentaro Anderson."

And Harry advanced. Goken had told the occidental wizards the name they had come up with, justifying the name by the fact that Harry's supposed mother had given birth to him in America, under her own name. The story they had been fed with also involved said mother dying at some point and Goken taking young Harry back to

Japan. It was a pun, though. Kentaro literally meant "sword tiger" and the two samurais had felt it was very appropriate to Harry's skill and character. The family name had a hidden meaning as well: "ander" meant "other" in German, so Harry was the "other son." It was still a relatively common name, so that the wizards wouldn't try to launch a large-scale search for the mother's records. All in all, it gave Harry a distinctive identity while not giving hints about it being forged.

His physical appearance hid him in plain sight as well. After many possibilities, Tracey had preferred Harry to keep his own face, with only a few alterations. He was tall and quite slim, although he kept his enhanced strength in that shape. His hair was his own, but the black mane was longer than before and held in a braid, reaching just below the shoulders. And his eyes were slanted and blue. Not the complete and swirling blue of water, but a regular eye shape with clear blue irises. Of course, he didn't have his scar anymore, and, with Voldemort's influence removed, it wouldn't appear anytime soon.

This time, he had been sure to construct a thoroughly believable false identity, too, and the Hat couldn't do much than yell its choice as soon as it was stuck on his head.

"SLYTHERIN."

After the meal, a disgruntled Snape went to Harry. "The Headmaster wishes to see you in his office." he said, his eyes belying his smooth words.

"Thank you, sir." Harry answered politely, nodding. Two could play this game.

He rose from his seat near the first years, where he had spent the whole meal. He had wanted to appear as inconspicuous as possible, and knew a few of them thanks to making the trip with them. He had still taken advantage of a mind connection to chat with Tracey during a good half of the meal.

As he couldn't very well be seen finding his way himself since he was supposed to be new to the school, the boy followed the Headmaster around until the man headed to his office. 'Thank Merlin, I came

prepared.' he thought, remembering his last action before leaving the Hogwarts Express.

He had had one of his visions, there. He knew that the alien swirling thing in his mind had diminished greatly since he recovered his memories, and the frequency of his visions had diminished as well. Despite this, he knew he could rely on them. Following that one, he had isolated himself in the train's toilets for a few minutes, casting the full body shield on himself, using Merlin's wand, and concentrating on absorption instead of reflection. That kind of focus had been one of his summer discoveries. During the vacation, he had also found that occidental magic, despite concentrating on wand moves and incantation, was highly relying on will and emotions. Despite being quite sad of not having had explanations about this in an introductory course to Magic Theory, he was glad to be able to finely control his spellcasting, even more so than before.

That was a protected Harry who followed the old man through his revolving staircase and in his cluttered office. Mere seconds after they entered it, Snape barged in as well.

"Nice to see that you have managed to get here." said Dumbledore.

"The brats- I mean..." he corrected himself, after noticing Harry there. "The students were reluctant to leave. And Flint was nowhere in sight, so I asked Garnet to fetch him." explained Snape, a bit out of breath, and Harry, having caught the man's first words, smirked internally. Trust the bitter man to threaten students, even from his own House. He didn't see the link with Flint, though.

"I'll see Mister Flint's status afterwards, then. Nevertheless," continued the old man genially, "let's have a round of presentations. As you have certainly been informed, Mister Anderson, I am Albus Dumbledore, Hogwarts Headmaster."

"Thank you, Headmaster, it's an honour. I haven't been informed, though." answered Harry.

"What do you mean?" asked Snape sharply.

“I mean that, having met only muggleborn first years in the train, I had no idea of your name before you told it to me.” answered Harry calmly. “I don’t know your name either.” he said, looking at his Head of House in the eye. “Nor do I know your job. Apart from travelling half the world to test me, what do you do?” he asked innocently.

If looks could kill...

“Now, now, my dear boys,” started Dumbledore, something which transferred Snape’s glare to him, “let’s not start on the wrong foot, shall we? Severus Snape, here, is Potion Master, Potion Professor, and your Head of House. Surely, you have heard of our Houses?”

Harry looked at him, his innocent expression still plastered on his face, and his thoughts tightly controlled. “No, sir. As I said, I met only first years who were as ignorant as I am about the magical world in general, and Hogwarts in particular. A few of them were positively terrified, by the way.”

“And you weren’t?” enquired Snape.

Harry looked at him. “Few things scare me, sir.”

A pregnant pause made a stop in the little office. As it felt unwelcome, it left through the open window.

“How dare you?” hissed Snape, advancing threateningly.

“I was merely stating the truth, sir.” answered Harry, still playing the innocent and straightforward child, but not backing out.

“ Now, now.” Dumbledore interrupted the two of them, before launching into a thorough explanation of the Houses and the character traits generally associated to them.

“You understand better, now?” he asked.

“Why, yes, thank you.” replied Harry. “But I wish I had a brochure or something to tell me all of this. It would have spared your precious time, Headmaster. And yours, too, Professor.” he added, as an afterthought.

Dumbledore looked surprised, before frowning thoughtfully. What the boy said made sense. They could send such a prospectus to the muggleborn families and that would prepare the future kids a little better. And he’d perhaps have more students, too. It wasn’t a well-known fact, but several muggle families refused to send their magical kids to Hogwarts each year. For a few of them, it was only a financial point of view, but Dumbledore suspected that the others could accept if they knew exactly what they were going to face.

“Headmaster?” asked Snape, waking Dumbledore from his thoughts. “Are you going to... you know?”

“Ah, yes.” answered Dumbledore reluctantly. Harry didn’t know it, but, several days ago, Snape had suspected the truth. The man had told Dumbledore that, given the fact that Harry was a Metamorphmagus, Harold Thomson and Kentaro Anderson could be the same person. The Potion Master knew that the two boys shared the uncommon trait of annoying him very much. Or maybe that trait wasn’t that uncommon...

“I’ll have only one final test.” Dumbledore merely said, drawing his wand and pointing at Harry. “Don’t be afraid, it’s not painful. Revelo Metamorpheus.”

Externally, nothing happened, and Harry had an internal breath of relief. Very internal and hidden, mind you. He had cast his shield with the appropriate focus earlier, and it had held true without advertising its presence.

Dumbledore didn’t catch it and nodded, before stowing his wand where it came from and looking at Snape. “Satisfied?”

The man nodded briskly, and turned toward the door. “Wait a moment, please.” asked Dumbledore before turning to Harry.

“Mister Anderson, I’m sorry to have kept you here. I think you will have a good magical education here, and I look forward to see you making quick friends with your Housemates.”

“Not the others, sir?” Harry enquired.

“What do you mean?”

“You said that you wanted me to make friends with my Housemates. It’s normal enough for people living together, as you told me earlier. But am I not allowed to make friends with other people as well?”

Snape looked murderous, but he was already halfway to the door so Harry didn’t see him and kept looking at Dumbledore innocently. He felt the Potion Master’s anger, though.

“Of course you can. I’ll be delighted to hear about it.” answered a widely smiling Dumbledore after a few seconds. “Now, as you’re new here, I’m sure Professor Snape will show you to the Slytherin common room. I’m sure I have a guest coming.” he finished just as a knock was heard at his door.

Snape huffed, but obeyed nonetheless. After all, the boy was now one of his official charges, and would be for six years. The Potion Master passed Flint on the way out, barely acknowledging him, and then walked the corridors briskly, Harry jogging behind him. For the umpteenth time of the year, Snape asked himself the same question: ‘Why did I choose to teach?’

At the same time, Marcus Flint was trying to explain last year’s dreadful grades to the Headmaster without much success, and the old man didn’t have much choice apart from making the Slytherin repeat a year.

Discovering the Slytherin common room after everyone, Harry had the displeasure of seeing the first year students being herded around Malfoy, of all people. A part of them were nodding along while the others looked surprised or even frightened at the boy’s words. The older students were mostly absent, catching up with each other in

their respective dorms. Only a few of them were still there, merely watching Malfoy's rant from afar.

"...and here we are, the noble House of Slytherin, the best of all. The others are rubbish, and we will prevail, like we always do."

"Excuse me." one of the younger students piped in. "Isn't it said in Hogwarts: A History that the Gryffindor House won the House Cup more times than Slytherin?"

That mere comment pleased Harry to no end. By what miracle did a male clone of Hermione land in Slytherin, he wouldn't know. It didn't have the same effect on everybody, though. The few older students in earshot looked only slightly offended, while Malfoy's retinue glared at the boy, clearly outraged. The blond looked apalled, and murderous.

"You wouldn't know when to shut up, you filthy little piece of trash?" he whispered threateningly, approaching the now-trembling first year. "I don't read the books slandering our House unjustly, and I expect you won't either."

"He's true, though." Harry said clearly, and twenty-or-so heads swivelled toward him. "Slytherin lost several times over the years because some arrogant people" he said, glaring at Malfoy "couldn't get their head out of their ass enough to see the truth."

"And the truth is?" asked another first year.

"We Slytherin are supposed to be ambitious, cunning, and stealthy; these are qualities that allow us to reach high goals. The other Houses have their own traits. Since the school was created, we won the House Cup a fair number of times, only seconding Gryffindor. And that's a fact." he added, looking at the spluttering Malfoy. After a two-second glaring contest, he continued. "If my memory serves me right, they won it 396 times and we prevailed 391 times. We are behind by only five victories. Five!" he said, holding a hand with his fingers

outstretched. "I am in Slytherin, and I will do all in my power to win the House Cup at least five times while I'm here. But not by spreading stupid lies to my own Housemates." he stated, looking at Malfoy's little club. "I will do so by being a Slytherin: ambitious, cunning, and stealthy. And I will also do so by being a student. No one graduated from this school without having a properly filled head on one's shoulders. Now, do you want to win that Cup?" he asked, his voice raising.

The first year students had been quite taken by his pep talk, as well as several of the older ones, and they all cheered.

"Good!" Harry said when the cheer lessened. "Let's see if you can start that quest early by getting a good night of sleep. School starts early tomorrow."

Harry looked as the first years went to their dorm, talking excitedly to each other. They wouldn't sleep early, he knew, but it would be a better start than listening to that prat.

Speaking of the devil...

"Who do you think you are?" an irate Malfoy demanded, looking at him.

"Kentaro Anderson." answered Harry calmly. "And who might you be?"

Malfoy spluttered for a second, before straightening up. With all his contempt, he tried to look down at Harry, a gesture made ridiculous by Harry being taller than him. "I'm Draco Malfoy, son of-"

"Malfoy, Malfoy..." Harry said, tapping a finger to his lips and effectively interrupting the other boy in the process. "That reminds me of something..." he faked thinking about it for a second. "Ah, yes! There was a Lucius Malfoy convicted after seeing the light, if my memory of that particular article is correct." He then looked at Malfoy with concern. "Are you by chance related? I mean... it wouldn't really be a chance, now would it?"

After a stunned pause, Malfoy raised his arms and uttered an inarticulate yell before turning away. In doing so, he noticed his bodyguards and stopped. Crabbe and Goyle had been waiting for a sign from their boss, and they got it. Malfoy calmed suddenly, winking at them, before whirling around. "You'll see what it does to provoke me."

Harry crossed his arms, unimpressed. He had caught the not-so-subtle byplay from the muscular boys and, despite showing less meat on his bones, he knew they couldn't do much to him. His assured stance confused the two bodyguards, and they looked back at Malfoy, who motioned them forward again. They went around the armchair between them and their target, one on each side, before lunging at Harry, aiming their fist to the boy's smirking face.

SMACK!

SLAP!

Two twin sounds of flesh beating flesh echoed in the now-silent common room. It was quickly followed by two wails of pain. Harry had just stepped back, and the two hulking boys had struck each other in the face. Holding their bruised jaw and battered ego, they returned to Malfoy, but the blond huffed and left toward his dormitory.

Seeing the skirmish outcome, a few older Slytherin nodded appraisingly, while others exchanged money. It seemed that some bet had been underway, Harry thought.

'Right.' answered Tracey in his mind. 'Last year, they did bet about how long Malfoy's reign would be.' she said amusedly, before sounding concerned. 'You scared me, you know.'

'I scared you?' he enquired. 'How long?'

'Just a second, mind you.' she answered playfully, and he thought she might have poked her tongue at him. 'I know you can take all of them in a jiffy.'

‘Empty-handed or with swords?’ he asked playfully.

‘They are so bad that you could have beaten all of them empty-handed while they were armed.’

He nodded absently. ‘That’s what I thought.’

‘Beware, though. You share a dorm with them.’ A short pause. ‘And don’t get too self-confident.’

‘I know, I know. You told me so yesterday. Remember my trunk’s content?’

Still in his mind, she laughed. ‘I do. You sure are doing better with Transfiguration, now.’

‘Thank you, but it’s mainly memories from Alison’s friend. Good night, now. I sense someone wanting to talk to me.’

‘Good night.’

An older student was walking toward Harry. “Hi. I’m William Garnet, sixth-year prefect.”

“Kentaro Anderson, second year big mouth.” answered Harry cheekily, and the other grinned.

“Your speech was interesting, Anderson. We haven’t succeeded in motivating the first years properly for a long time, and you seemed to have done it pretty well.”

“Why, thank you.”

“It was quite suicidal, though.” Garnet continued, frowning. “In fact, it was more a Gryffindor act of bravery to publicly oppose Malfoy. Beware of him.” the prefect continued, his voice lowering. “He’s quite

the epitome of ambition, and his father was holding the Board of Governors last year.”

“I’m sorry about disrupting the House establishment. As I just arrived, I didn’t know who was in charge here. It seemed to me that the boy could be taken down a peg or three.”

Garnet smirked. “And you did it quite well. He was in charge for most of the previous year, apart from his strange issues.”

“Was?”

“Yes. You know that Malfoy senior had been imprisoned recently, and then escaped. He won’t be seen in public, then. Or so I think.” Garnet finished, frowning. “Since then, anyway, he was less influent already, and the older years began to detach themselves from him. That’s why you could banter with him without our intervention.”

Harry nodded. “And his issues?”

“Last year, he was acting strangely at random moments. However, at the welcoming feast, he told us that those issues were definitely gone, and told anyone pretending the contrary to address grievances to his bodyguards, Crabbe and Goyle. You know about those two, now.” he said, smirking. “Although I bet Bulstrode could be, too. That hunk of a girl doesn’t seem to do anything else than following Malfoy. In fact, almost all second years tag along with him. Only Zabini and Davis don’t.” He smiled again. “And you.”

Harry nodded thoughtfully. That wasn’t really fresh news for him, but he now knew more about the extent of Malfoy’s previous influence in the House. As it was late already, the two of them parted ways with a nod and went to their respective dorms.

In front of his dorm door, Harry expanded his senses carefully. He smirked, and slammed the door open before jumping over the trapped area. Rolling on the ground afterwards, he swiped Crabbe’s legs from under him, causing the large boy to fall. Harry finished his roll with a jump on Goyle, his knee raised. He could swear the boy

was lifted a few inches from the low blow. Whatever height he attained, Goyle rolled to the side afterwards, unconscious, and Harry found himself face to face with Malfoy's wand.

“Reduc-”

Malfoy couldn't finish his spell and his smirk melted away as Harry picked the wand from his fingers.

“Thank you.” he said, before going to his bed. Using Malfoy's wand, he used the Finite Incantatem spell to remove all the traps there and on his trunk. “Nice wand.” he said to the dumbfounded boy. “I think I'll keep it.” he finished with a smirk, and his last sight before closing the green bed curtains was Malfoy's horrified face. He then picked Merlin's wand from his locket and magically locked his curtains, focusing on rendering them impervious to all Slytherin students except Tracey.

It was just in time, though, as Malfoy was trying to get through.

“Give me my wand!” the blond was whining.

Sounding annoyed, he retorted. “Go to bed, little boy. Some of us are trying to sleep. Silencio.”

Once alone, and wanting to test that he could still move around in the castle, he silently Apparated from one corner of his bed to another, before going to sleep, satisfied.

Harry was one of the first up the next day. He then went to the empty bathroom and took a long and hot shower. A towel wrapped around his waist, he crossed Blaise Zabini on his way out. The tall black boy looked at him for a second, before speaking. “Good show, yesterday.” was all he said before heading for the showers himself.

“Gee, thanks.” muttered Harry before going to his bed. Once inside of the protective curtains, he extracted his clothes and schoolbag from his locket. The bag's inside was enlarged like the locket, and it contained all the books he would need that year while only appearing

and weighing as if it was moderately loaded. After finishing preparing for the day, Harry extracted his tanto and put it in his enlarged robe pocket. When he jumped out of bed, he noticed that Malfoy hadn't woken up yet and, smiling, he took a fake wand from the bag pocket holding all the joke items he had bought at Gambol and Japes. After transfiguring it into an exact replica of Malfoy's and putting it on the boy's night table, he left the dorm.

In the Great Hall, very few students were up already, but Harry had the pleasure to see that his friends were all there. Even Ron. He and Ginny were even arguing as if she had woken him up too early – which was the case. He mentally contacted them, and recounted the previous day's events, and the few Gryffindors near the two Weasleys had the surprise to see their argument transforming into full-blown laughter. At the Ravenclaw table, Hermione was more discreet in her amusement, but, in the privacy of her own mind, she laughed even louder.

The students were given their schedules that morning, and Harry discovered that each of the House Heads had a different way of doing so. McGonagall was always giving the Gryffindors' personally, while Sprout gave the whole stack to a Hufflepuff prefect who dispatched them afterwards. Flitwick was handing out blank sheets parchment, charmed to turn into the recipient's proper schedule. And Snape was depositing the whole stack on the end of Slytherin table closest to him, and he left the students find by themselves.

Harry picked his schedule from the pile and, parsing it while eating his breakfast, noticed that the only workload difference from last year was an additional Transfiguration period. The hours were different as well, and most of their courses were held with the Gryffindors. And, for their first day, the two Houses' second year students had a free period before History of Magic.

Harry was surprised by something, though. The previous day, they hadn't seen their Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher at the head table, and Dumbledore had told everyone about her grim disappearance. What had surprised him was that the old man hadn't mentioned her replacement, and, reading the schedule, Harry discovered something which filled him with a mixed feeling. It was

half-anticipation and half-dread. Remus and Sirius were going to teach?

He didn't read the advertisement about Quidditch tryouts on the schedule and tucked it in his bag before finishing his breakfast, quietly discussing with Tracey and a few other Slytherins who recognized him from the previous evening.

As the students started to file out of the Great Hall for their first period, Harry grew concerned. Malfoy hadn't reappeared since yesterday. Harry didn't let his qualms get to him, though, and headed out as well. He hadn't needed to worry, though, as the blond was right at the Hall doors. As soon as he saw Harry, he jumped in front of him and yelled "REDUCTO!"

That could have worked, except that the fake wand felt the magic of the spell and immediately transformed into a very dead rat. Malfoy yelped in fright and threw the animal to the ground in disgust. He looked at his dirtied hand and almost fainted when noticing the grime still sticking to it.

"What's going on there?" asked a sharp voice.

Malfoy turned toward the speaker and, noticing Snape, started to whine. "It's Kentaro, sir. He stole my wand, and..."

The man looked at Harry with a malicious glint in his eyes, and Harry sensed that the situation could turn ugly within seconds. "I'd be more than happy to disprove this by providing my memories, sir." he said. "After all, you've been there before." he added.

"No need, no need." said Snape silkily. "I'm sure that Mr Malfoy's recollection is quite accurate."

"In that case," answered Harry, "I'll bring this to Professor Dumbledore."

"The Headmaster doesn't need to be disturbed by your childish rants. Now, that will be one week of detention, to serve with the

caretaker.” the Potion Master said, before whirling and leaving, his robes flowing around him.

‘Poser.’ thought Harry, before opening his mouth again. “I’m not sure the Headmaster will be happy to know that you protected a student from punishment when said student just shouted "Reducto" in a hallway full of students.” he said.

Snape, who had walked a few steps away, froze and turned back. He looked down at the boy. “Had magic happened here? Did Mr Malfoy cast a spell?”

“Well, not exactly, but...”

“And yet he was toyed with, with one of the joke items which undoubtedly are listed as forbidden in Mr Filch’s office. That will be one more week of detention, Mr Anderson, during which you will be able to learn the 653 items of that list by heart.” the man then leaned closer, and Harry felt sure he could have smelled the man’s aftershave, had Snape used any. “If I ever hear you speaking out of turn again, Mr Anderson, I’ll make sure you are expelled from this school. Understood?”

Harry was stunned at the man’s gall, and couldn’t answer anything. He was also starting to build a towering rage. His fists clenched and unclenched, and Snape smirked at seeing the boy in that state. ‘Let him try something,’ he was thinking, ‘and he’s out.’

Tracey had felt Harry’s anger, though, and she grabbed him by the arm before he could do anything rash. “I think he understood.” she said, before trying to drag Harry out of the confrontation.

“If you don’t mind, Miss Davis,” interrupted Snape, “I’d like to hear it from his mouth.”

Tracey froze, and went to Harry’s mind to try to ease him. To her surprise, his anger seemed to have subsided a bit, and was replaced with a cold and hard determination. Harry looked up and icy blue eyes met onyx ones. “I understand, sir. I understand very well.” he

said, and his voice carried all his hatred and contempt of the man and his methods.

Before anyone could do something, he had left with Tracey, and life could start again at the Great Hall doors. Snape was oblivious to the students, though. Despite being happy at having slammed the impertinent mouth shut, he felt he had missed something. Something important. His thoughts were disrupted by a tug at his sleeve.

“Sir?” asked Malfoy. “For my wand?”

The Potion Master looked at the snivelling coward who was his godson. He could protect him and everything, but he would always see the boy as he was, and it was sometimes wearing on his nerves. He shrugged his sleeve free and addressed him. “Get it back, or get another one.” he said, before leaving.

During lunch, Tracey got more and more nervous. That afternoon was reserved for Potions, and she wasn't sure to be able to keep Harry cool with Snape nearby. And when the class started, it was even worse, as Snape seemed to have decided, on his own accord, to pair the student using the worse method. As a result, she was paired with Crabbe, Ron was paired with Goyle, and Harry was paired with... Malfoy, of all people.

She sent a tentative thought toward Harry, trying to soothe him. It surprised, her, though, to find his mind in the same cold and determined state.

‘Aren't you angered?’ she asked.

‘Of course I am. I'm just not letting the old bat take advantage of me. Thank you, by the way... for earlier.’

She nodded, and started to work. She had to work thrice as much as usual, because Crabbe was not only unwilling to work properly, but he was also damaging every effort she was making. After half an hour in the double period, she huffed indignantly. She had been scowled at a dozen times by Snape, and had thwarted as many

catastrophes from Crabbe. Reaching to Harry, she asked 'Can you do something for Crabbe?'

He looked up and, noticing her state, nodded and went to the boy's barren mind. He couldn't do much while being in the process of brewing a potion, but made him more compliant to Tracey. Searching for Goyle, he then noticed Ron's temper starting to get the best of him.

'Calm down.' he sent his friend. 'I'm taking care of him.'

He went to the second bodyguard's mind and repeated the process. He then returned to his mind to see that Malfoy was edging away from the cauldron, a smirk on his face. The blond boy's peripheral thoughts shouted victory and it had something to do with Harry's distracted state a second ago, a cauldron, and an imminent explosion.

'Uh oh...'

BANG!

Snape swivelled like only he could do and approached the workbench. "Well, well, well..." he started. "It seems that our new addition has a few problems. That would be another week of detention, Mr Anderson." he said to the unconscious boy.

He then pointed at Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle. "You three, pick him up and bring him to the infirmary. You'll tell Pomfrey about the detention so that she could inform him whenever he'll wake."

Tracey stood up. "Sir! I'd rather accompany-"

"You'll stay put, Miss Davis, or you'll be awarded another detention." Snape retorted, not even turning back. When he looked at the girl, though, it was with a nasty glare. "And it won't be with your boyfriend."

Tracey sat down, utterly shocked. How comes the man could be so mean? 'Harry will sort it out.' she thought. 'He always does.'

A minute later, Malfoy was walking in the corridors, followed by Crabbe and Goyle carrying Harry. The two massive boys had dropped the pretence of taking care of him, and were dragging him by the legs, his head banging on the castle floor.

The blond was unsuccessfully trying to open Harry's schoolbag, and it annoyed him to no end. Stopping his bodyguards, he kicked at Harry's prone form in anger. After doing it repeatedly for a few seconds, he heard a metallic sound, and had the surprise to see that a blade had fallen from the dark-haired boy's pocket.

He went to the fallen knife, motioning his bodyguards forward. "Your turn." he absently said, pointing at the unconscious boy.

Malfoy grasped the blade and looked at it intently. It was beautiful, despite its unusual bent shape. It was also covered in runes, but it didn't seem to be magical. His eyes acquired a truly evil glint and he looked at Harry's body, weighing the oriental dagger and his options. If he killed him there, would he get away with it? His mind worked full speed, evaluating the scenarios. He could say that the annoying boy woke up on the way and decided to head there by himself. And someone else could have stabbed him. It was believable, and he just had to find another possible culprit. Hearing the Gryffindor first years coming back from Charms, he smirked and thanked his lucky star. Having had his kind of education was sometimes a good thing.

Fetching Harry's wand from his pocket, he approached the corridor the students were passing through and, aiming at the last one, uttered a single word.

"Imperio."

Colin Creevey was a small boy, with the hobby of photography. As such, he was often walking more slowly than the others, always looking at his surroundings with a photographer's eye. When he was looking at the particular arrangement of paintings in a certain corridor, he suddenly got his attention grabbed by a blond boy wearing the Slytherin robes. The boy was motioning him forward, and Colin didn't find any strangeness in following his orders.

The blond boy then gave him a gleaming blade and ordered him to wait for a few seconds and then plunge it into the prone body of another Slytherin on the floor. Malfoy then left toward the dungeons. Colin was in his little world, and didn't think twice about it. After twenty seconds, he did as he was told and the gleaming blade plunged toward Harry's heart.

Draco Malfoy walked back in the classroom his head held high, and a half-smirk on his face. It had taken the boy's entire self-control to diminish his full-blown grin into that already. Tracey noticed it, though, and her insides grew cold.

"Kentaro awoke in the way, sir." Malfoy told his Head of House, who nodded. "He wanted to go there by himself."

"Very well." Snape merely answered, before resuming his rounds around the class, tormenting Neville Longbottom to no end.

After the period ended, Malfoy strutted out of the class, and was heading to the Slytherin dungeons when Tracey caught up with him. "What did you do?"

"What do you mean by that, mudblood?"

Tracey's anger got the better of her, and she slapped him. "What did you do with... Kentaro?"

Malfoy put his hand to his cheeks in disbelief, not believing that someone could slap him. His eyes glinting menacingly, he drew his wand and aimed it at Tracey, who gasped. Holly, eleven inches. Harry's.

"I did with him what I'm going to do with you." said Malfoy. "Diffin-"

He couldn't finish his incantation as the wand was ripped from his finger by an unseen force, before speeding through the corridor. Malfoy looked at his hands in disbelief, and his bodyguards reacted by advancing threateningly toward the girl, but the other Slytherin

students walked by, and the two mounds of flesh proved their cleverness by retreating.

Knowing that she'd be better protected among people, Tracey joined the others toward the dorm.

...or tried to.

The blade recognized its owner, and stopped itself a hair's breadth from Harry's skin, sending a jolt toward Colin, who fell into unconsciousness as well.

During the next period, no one passed in that very corridor, and the two boys recovered slowly. The first to wake up was Harry, and he felt sore from all over, and royally screwed up. Looking around, he noticed his tanto on the ground, and an unconscious Gryffindor beside it. He was in a cold corridor between the Entrance Hall and the Potion classroom, and a glance at the windows told him that it was still daytime. And his memories told him that Malfoy was behind all this.

Harry pocketed his tanto, re-sheathing it in the process, and discovered that his wand was missing. His schoolbag wasn't there either. He was quite upset, but relieved that his locket was still in place. After fishing Ravenclaw's ring from there, he magically summoned his bag to him, using the Accio spell. A Scourgify was necessary afterwards, too, as his bag had certainly been hidden in a dump or something similar. Thank Merlin, his Impervious charm had made it so that the bag's content was still there and untouched. Focusing on his wand next, he repeated the Accio spell and was happy to see it soaring through the air toward him in one piece.

Hearing the voices of students nearby, Harry grabbed Colin's hand and dragged him in the gaseous reality with him. He then went to the boy's mind to discover what had happened. Once there, he found a strange glow around the white building, which reminded him about Malfoy's aura. He didn't know what it was, but felt it couldn't be healthful for the young Gryffindor and set his mind on removing it. However, he quickly discovered that, like the influences of Voldemort and the werewolf, it couldn't be deleted. Concentrating on it, he still succeeded in putting it inside a small package, before transferring it

to his own mind prison, where the werewolf's influence was at rest, waiting for the full moon.

He then explored the boy's memories, and found about Malfoy's command and results. He started to feel angry, but sensed that Colin was starting to wake up. After exiting the younger boy's mind and waiting a few seconds, he saw him open eyes wide and looking around him in fright.

"Wha-?"

"Do not worry, Colin."

That made the younger boy look at Harry in amazement, before casting a glance around. "Where are we?" he asked, before frowning. "Did I kill you? I remember... Oh my god! I killed you!" he exclaimed, his distress visible. "Am I dead?"

"Calm yourself, please." said Harry. "You didn't kill me, and you're not dead."

"But..."

"You used my own knife, and it's charmed not to harm me." Harry half-lied.

The other boy frowned. "Still, I did stab you, didn't I? I'm a murderer!" he finished with a strangled cry.

"No, you're not." answered Harry. "You were cursed by... an older student... who seems to have something against me."

"I was?"

Harry nodded, and that seemed to appease Colin somewhat. The Gryffindor looked around. "Where are we?"

"We are in a hiding place in the deepest dungeons." answered Harry. "As you were still unconscious, I preferred to hide instead of

being subjected to odd curses again. Are you ready to return to the real world?"

"Yes, but..."

"Yes?"

"You know my name, but I'm sorry I don't remember yours."

"Ah, yes. Kentaro Anderson. Slytherin second year."

"Colin Creevey, Gryffindor first year. I suppose we should shake hands, but I don't know if you would."

"What do you mean?"

"There are some people in Gryffindor who say that the Slytherin are utterly evil."

Harry smirked. "I'd be happy to prove them wrong anytime." he answered before extending his hand.

Colin looked at it for a second, before shaking it vigorously.

"Now," started Harry, still holding Colin's hand, "I need you to close your eyes. I'm going to invoke the spell to return where we were."

Colin obeyed, and Harry uttered meaningless sounds before Apparating the two of them in. "Remember to walk the corridors accompanied." said Harry just as they parted ways.

"Thank you. I will." Colin answered, nodding, and he left toward the Entrance Hall and Gryffindor Tower.

Once alone, Harry felt angry again about Malfoy's actions. He knew, however, that he should wait for another occasion for taking revenge. As some people said – Pierre Choderlos de Laclos among them – "Revenge is a dish best served cold." On top of that, he couldn't very well go to Dumbledore without exposing some of his powers. Besides,

it was his own fault: Malfoy had taken advantage of him in a distracted state, and he vowed to himself to take control of his immediate surroundings before exploring minds again.

Once calmed and back in his dorm, Harry noticed that it was empty. His watch told him that the dinner was underway, which explained why. He Apparated to the busy kitchens and got a basket of food before returning to his bed. He knew he had a few bruises and cracked bones, and spent several minutes taking care of his body before eating the basket's content.

At the same time, a wary Colin entered the Great Hall, late for dinner. He had just enough time to catch up with the main course before dessert appeared.

"Where were you?" asked Ginny. "I was afraid you got lost."

"I was, in a way." answered the boy cryptically, looking around before lowering his voice. "I'll tell you later."

Ginny's eyes lit up with curiosity, but the boy seemed afraid of something and she resolved to wait.

Her curiosity went up a few notches when they got out of the Great Hall. As Colin was walking out, he came face-to-face with a blond Slytherin, who merely said "Follow me." before turning away.

Colin paled, but straightened up. "No." he said.

Malfoy froze and looked back. "I said follow me!" he exclaimed, and it got the attention of several people around.

"Why?" asked Colin, reassured by the people around them. "I prefer going back to my tower with my friends."

The blond Slytherin was positively puzzled. "You won't follow me?"

“As he said, no.” answered Ron, who had been following Ginny and Colin as they had been heading out. “Now, will you be a kind Slytherin and return to your dungeons?”

Malfoy growled, and visibly hesitated between lunging at them, thus making a fool of himself, or let the matter drop. With a contemptuous scowl, he chose the latter. While walking to his dorms, the blond boy was reflecting, intrigued about the fact that a person under Imperius could refuse a direct order. Malfoy borrowed Crabbe's wand again and used the appropriate verifying spell, but the result was the same as before: his spell was still in place. He frowned. To cancel that spell, he needed to cast the Finite Incantatem on its target, but how could he do that if the target wasn't complying? Could the target shrug it off without him knowing?

His steps brought him to the place where he had ordered Colin to knife Kentaro, and he looked at the floor, thoughtful. Something was missing.

It was only when he reached his dorm, noticing the still-closed – and still-impervious – curtains around Harry's bed, that he found what it was. There had been no blood on the corridor floor.

At the same time, Harry was sitting in a post office three time zones to the west, writing on parchment he had bought there with a quill he had borrowed there as well. In case someone would visit later, his identity and facial features had been changed to Harold's.

Once he had finished writing, he gave the letters to the employee and watched as the two toucans were sent away. Exiting the office, he hid himself and Apparated back to his bed in Hogwarts for a good night of sleep.

Headmaster's office, the next morning...

Dumbledore looked at the two parchments in front of him. He had received the first one a minute ago, just as he was on the verge of going to the Great Hall, and it had stopped him right where he was. The second had been obtained through less-than-legal means, way before.

The first was Harry's letter from Brazil, and the second was the Ministry's sheet recording activity on the wand registered to Harold Thomson. It was linked to his wand signature and would activate whenever the boy would cast a spell, wherever he was in the world. Dumbledore sometimes wished he could have the same kind of parchment for people like Tom Riddle, but they were automatically destroyed when the targeted magic user became of-age.

In Dumbledore's hands the first parchment was mildly informative, while the second was blank since school ended, last June. The last spell cast was a Wingardium Leviosa, undoubtedly for the Charms exam.

Albus Dumbledore read the newer parchment again.

Dear Headmaster,

I have safely arrived in Rio de Janeiro, and my father and I have been contacted by local wizards. I am proud to be a student of the local Escuela de la Magia. It's fascinating. They have many small wizarding schools here, and I found one close to my father's new house, so I can come back home every day.

I wanted to thank you for having taken care of me, last year. In my point of view, you have been an interesting role model, and I won't rest until I find the "twelve uses of snake eyes" or something similar. Perhaps, if I come back to England, I could see you again? Perhaps you'll have integrated my idea by then, too. Remember? It was the inter-house common rooms.

Until then,

Harold Thomson

In a last attempt at finding the boy's whereabouts, Dumbledore put a tracking spell on the exotic bird and sighed as it was leaving his office. When would this chase stop? At the same time, the message's last sentence reminded him that it had actually been a good idea from the start, and he decided to propose it to the next Board meeting. With Lucius Malfoy out of the picture, it had a chance to pass.

If he hadn't been focusing on Harold's letter so much, he would have eaten his breakfast in the Great Hall with everybody, and he would have noticed that another toucan had arrived in Hogwarts that morning, dropping a letter on Susan's knees. Such a colourful bird got the attention of several students, who approached it with the usual owl treats, but Susan knew – from an earlier mail from Harry – that this kind of bird only liked fruits. Insects, too, but there were none on their breakfast-laden tables.

Watching the proceedings, Harry smiled. The letter would give the girl something to think about, and he hoped it would ease the hurt she was feeling about Harold's unexpected departure.

The day saw the Slytherin sharing their classes with the Gryffindor as usual, starting with Herbology and Transfiguration. Draco had the displeasure to see a fresh and healthy Harry entering the first classroom, and glared at him for both periods. If Harry noticed it, he didn't say so. Instead, the Asian-looking boy worked hard in Herbology, and merely applied himself in Transfiguration, a course for which he now had the appropriate memories already.

In fact, Harry didn't mind learning things the normal way. He had spent so much of his life on the run, that learning things slowly was actually his manner of enjoying a bit of peace. To Tracey's mock chagrin, he even refrained from showing off in Transfiguration, feeling that it would have cheated the others.

The period being quite drab, he also let his ideas wander a bit, reflecting about his magical upbringing. Since he had full access to all his memories, he knew that, at the beginning, he had had a few accidental magic happenstances, quickly followed by wandlessly – and wordlessly – controlled magic. At one moment in his youth, he had thought that magic was just happening because he wished things to happen. That had been true for a while, but it wasn't possible anymore, and something he had heard once could be the cause of it: magical maturity. As McGonagall was approaching the desk he shared with Tracey, he stored these thoughts next to his memory block related to Hermione, deciding he would ask her later.

Harry avoided Malfoy during lunch, and made himself scarce afterwards. The blond boy had been reinforced into his dominating position by Snape's actions, and was now strolling the castle as if it was his property. Several Slytherins began to rally his banner once more, not knowing that Harry was watching them, taking count of who could switch sides so easily.

They entered the Defence class just as the bell rang, and found their two teachers waiting for them in a usual classroom, and a very large and empty room beside it. It was as if the left wall had been cleanly blasted and a whole room was behind. A well-lit room large enough to include an Olympic sports track.

"Welcome, class." started Sirius, from the teacher's chair he was sitting on. "Please refrain from gasping or overly expressing emotion when I tell you my name. I'm Sirius Black."

Despite his warning, and despite knowing it from the schedule, Daphne Greengrass, Lavender Brown, and Parvati Patil gasped.

"And I'm Remus Lupin." continued the other man, standing beside the desk with his arms folded. "We are going to teach you Defence Against the Dark Arts."

"Or die trying." Sirius said, rising to his feet while smirking at his own joke. "Our program for the year will include a discussion about Dark Magic and the classification of spells as such. We will study several items, whether they are classified as dark or are usable in defence against dark arts."

"And we will study a few dark creatures, such as grindylows, pogrebins, and hinkypunks. I understand you studied the boggarts last year?" Remus finished.

A few nods marked the students' acquiescence.

"Aren't we going to study the werewolves?" a voice asked.

Remus flinched imperceptibly, but answered calmly nonetheless. "Werewolves are to be studied in the last term of third year, Mister...?"

"Malfoy. Draco Mal-"

"Good!" interrupted Sirius, ignoring Malfoy's subsequent dark gaze. "Speaking of curriculum, we have to say that Defence Against the Dark Arts involves defence against dark wizards as well as dark creatures, so we will be practising duelling." Some of the students grinned – mostly purebloods – but their smile faltered when Sirius continued. "And, as physical health is important for duelling, there will be physical exercises as well."

Except for a few students, the class groaned. They now understood what the large room was for.

"I see you grasped the concept." said Sirius, smirking again. "I can assure you that, keeping a healthy body is paramount in surviving a duel. Or a stay in prison." he finished grimly.

"I don't think so." Malfoy piped in.

There was a blank. Few students dared contradict the teachers, especially in their own classroom and rarely before their later years. But Malfoy was brazen with his recent increase in popularity.

"I see..." said Remus pensively, his fingers on lips crooked by a half-smile. "Why won't we hold a small duelling tournament, then? To see everyone's level and to check if you really don't need the physical training."

While a gleeful-looking Sirius went to the side room to conjure duelling platforms, Remus herded the students there. "Let's see." he said, his quill poised on a sheet of parchment. "We are going to use official duelling tournament rules, with a few provisos. No dark spell, of course, which includes, as you are going to study that, no spell to actually harm your opponent. A match ends when one of the opponents yields, is disarmed, or unconscious."

Despite thinking that disarming an opponent wasn't sufficient to ensure victory, Harry kept quiet. His instincts told him that something was waiting to happen.

"Each winner of a pair will compete against the winner of the next pair, and so on until there are only two students left." Remus continued. "Since it's only an evaluation tool, there won't be points awarded or taken away. And you will all participate." he added, seeing the reluctance etched on a few faces. "The pairs will be... Kentaro Anderson against Ronald Weasley, Theodore Nott against Neville Longbottom, Blaise Zabini against Seamus Finnigan..."

Remus continued the list, randomly pairing the students one after the other and walking among them as he was talking. His pacing stopped abruptly as he came near Harry. The man's nostrils flared open and he looked at him with a strange expression. It was well-schooled, but Harry's peripheral Legilimency picked up a flurry of emotions before the man turned away. Recognition first, then anger, defiance, mistrust, sadness, and an intense curiosity.

"Since there are more Slytherin students than Gryffindor this year," Remus continued as if nothing had happened, "we will pair the four remaining Slytherin together. Vincent Crabbe against Gregory Goyle, and Draco Malfoy against Pansy Parkinson."

The students took their place on the two raised platforms. As there were two teachers, two matches could start at the same time. The first two pitted Harry against Ron, and Nott against Longbottom. Ron, knowing about Harry's identity and powers, sent a short prayer to his friend's mind, asking him to end it quickly and painlessly.

Harry smirked and nodded before they went into position. Remus shouted "Start!" and Harry merely whispered the Summoning spell before Ron's wand flew toward his outstretched left hand. Next to them, Nott had tried to use a spell they hadn't learnt yet, but Longbottom evaded it and sent a Trip jinx to make his opponent fall. Two seconds later, Longbottom had picked the wand from the hand of a still surprised Nott.

The other matches weren't as quick, though. Most of the purebloods knew a spell or two ahead of the regular curriculum, and used them without restraint. The muggleborns were generally more nimble, though, and seemed better at avoiding spells. It took half an hour to sort out the first matches, ending with a 5-second encounter between Malfoy and Parkinson, the boy using the Furnunculus spell and taking advantage of her shocked state to snatch her wand off her hand. Malfoy's bodyguards, though, didn't move for five minutes. When it appeared that they couldn't cast a spell, Malfoy won his next round automatically. He didn't even notice that Pansy Parkinson, her face still covered in boils, was glaring at him.

The next round started by pitting Neville Longbottom against Harry on the first platform, and Blaise Zabini against Dean Thomas on the second. Harry stepped on the platform and saw the shy Gryffindor step in front of him. Despite what Snape was saying, and despite the Potion Professor being right in his domain, the boy was proficient in magic and quite nimble, his previous duel proving it.

Harry repeated his previous spell, and Longbottom evaded it the same way he did with Nott's previous attack. His Trip jinx, though, didn't hit Harry as the Slytherin jumped out of the way as well. Harry's second Accio worked just fine, and Harry grabbed the flying wand from the air, finishing the duel. Next to them, Zabini and Finnigan's duel was even quicker. Zabini had repeated the spell Nott used earlier, and it disarmed Finnigan quickly, with the side effect of pushing him back a few steps.

Since Malfoy had won the round by forfeit, there was only one other match to watch, and Tracey won it almost as quickly as he and Zabini.

In the third round, there were only four students left, and the two winners would go to the finals. The round pitted Blaise Zabini against Harry on the first platform, and the black boy looked at Harry shrewdly while stepping on it. As they were getting ready, Harry noticed Malfoy stepping on the second platform, and Tracey going against him. He didn't like Malfoy's expression, and mentally told Tracey to beware, before focusing on his own fight.

When Remus told them to start, Zabini started to cast a spell, but Harry repeated his last spell, Summoning his opponent's wand in his hand. Zabini wasn't finished, though. He deftly extracted another wand from his pocket.

"Expelliarmus." he yelled, while Harry was wondering about his actions. Harry was hit by the spell but gripped his wand strongly, not letting it fly away from his hand. The spell's side effect made him take half a step backwards as well, before straightening up.

Zabini's right eyebrow shot up, and Harry smirked. "Accio." he repeated, and Zabini gripped his wand desperately, advancing a few steps in the process. When the spell effect ended, Zabini shouted "Petrificus Totalus."

"Protego." said Harry, and Zabini's spell rebounded toward him, turning his body rigid, and he fell on his back.

Harry advanced toward his opponent and picked his wand to end the duel. He then looked around, and noticed that Malfoy was being restrained by Sirius. Apparently, the blond had decided to take advantage of Tracey's prone form for some humiliation. He had won, and Tracey was quite annoyed at the boy for stepping on her afterwards, while he could only have picked her wand.

Harry returned his gaze at his own platform, and cast the Finite Incantatem spell to end the Full Body Bind curse.

While the less-proficient audience was watching in awe, the two of them shook hands. "Good match." commented Zabini in his usual laconic way, while taking his wand back. When Harry wanted to give him his other wand, he smirked. "You can keep it. I know I won't fool you twice with it."

When Harry looked at him inquiringly, Zabini's smirk intensified. "I noticed that your only duelling spell so far was Accio, so I transfigured a napkin into a wand." He took his false wand and waved it around. Despite its almost-perfect shape, it didn't produce anything.

“Impressive.” said Harry. “You sure fooled me there.” and it was true, because Zabini’s mind hadn’t filtered anything about his plan. Harry focused on the black boy’s mind for a second, and had the surprise to see a well-defended structure. Returning to normalcy, he nodded at Zabini and the black boy stepped down the platform.

“Our last match,” started Remus with something – expectancy? – in his voice, “will pit Kentaro Anderson and Draco Malfoy.”

The two boys got into position, and Remus opened his mouth to tell them to start.

Before he said it, though, Malfoy had acted. “Serpensortia.”

A large snake erupted from his wand, and started to slither toward Harry, who looked at it dispassionately. He looked at Draco, raised an eyebrow and repeated his usual spell. “Accio.”

Harry knew, from discussing with his own snakes during the summer vacation, that snakes sensed Parselmouths and never attacked them, whether they were magical or not. To everyone’s surprise, Draco’s snake coiled itself at Harry’s feet.

Harry was inspecting Draco’s wand. “It’s not yours.” he stated, and went to the boy’s mind in search of the wand owner. Unsurprisingly, it was a first year. A Slytherin boy. Malfoy hadn’t even taken care of getting the boy’s name while Crabbe and Goyle were intimidating him enough to give his wand away. Harry barely recognized him either, only remembering his name. Barber. Or Harper. Or...

A sharp pain in his jaw brought him back to reality, only to find a smug Malfoy looking at him. Harry noticed something else, too. Something which brought back memories of a final fight in China, several years ago. Malfoy had his opponent-confusing bracers on, probably since the morning. Only this time, Harry was better prepared. His mind, being impenetrable, couldn’t be affected, and he smirked.

“Wanted to get rid of me, Malfoy?” he whispered. “Unlikely.”

He then put his hand on the boy's chest, bypassing his feeble defence attempts, and pushed. Hard.

Malfoy slid a few feet backwards, arms flailing wildly, before falling off the platform into an undignified heap that continued to slide for another yard or two. Harry, wanting to attribute his action to his supposed Japanese upbringing and the corresponding martial arts, had kept his body taut and his hand extended while Malfoy was gliding away. He then made a few moves for show before relaxing.

The two teachers clapped politely, closely followed by the Gryffindors and a few Slytherins.

“And that is why we are going to do some physical training.” concluded Sirius and, this time, nobody complained.

The lesson continued with a debriefing about each student's current strengths and weaknesses, obtained through observation of the duels. The two teachers then held the promised discussion about dark magic, explaining the concept of intention-driven spells, and providing the questions when the students didn't think to ask them. Malfoy was sulking at the back and left the room as soon as the bell rang.

Harry was going to follow, but got intercepted by Remus. “Can you stay, Mr Anderson?” the werewolf asked with a serious look.

The boy felt that it had more to do about Remus' earlier reaction than his prowess in duelling, but couldn't very well refuse outright. “Well, yes, but I have something to do first. Can I have just a minute, please?”

“What for?”

Harry showed the wand he had taken from Malfoy. “Malfoy stole this from someone. I'm going to give it back.”

The teacher nodded, and Harry left the classroom.

“An honest Slytherin?” asked Sirius after a few seconds. “That would be a change.”

Remus was thoughtful. “You know, Padfoot, now that I think about it, dishonesty isn’t a vaunted Slytherin trait.”

“What is?”

“Slytherin traits? Ambition, cunning, stealth. If you had read Hogwarts, A History, you would-”

“Oh come on, with your damn book!” Sirius said, before frowning thoughtfully about it for a few seconds. “You know, Moony? If you had told me that when we were younger, I’d have beaten the crap out of you.”

“Why?”

“Because two of the supposedly Slytherin traits are Marauders’.”

They both smiled.

Turning round an empty corridor, Harry Apparated to his bed before going to the first years’ dormitories. Finding Harper wasn’t difficult, as he was the one crying in his bed, while most of the other first year boys were trying to comfort him.

“Harper.” Harry merely said, summoning as much kindness in his voice as he could. The boy looked up, and Harry extended his arm. “Your wand.”

The boy’s eyes lit up, and he jumped off his bed, stopping near him. He had almost hugged him – it was definitely not a Slytherin gesture – and reverted to a grateful handshake instead.

“If any of you has the same kind of problem with Malfoy,” continued Harry, looking at the others, “come to me as soon as possible. If I’m unavailable, Tracey can help, too. Don’t go see Snape.”

“We know.” answered the boy named Joachim Zulthan, and Harry identified the year’s know-it-all from earlier. “We went to him and he almost gave us detention for distracting his potion brewing.” he snorted. “I saw the Daily Prophet opened on his desk!”

Harry nodded. “Take care.” he said, before going back to his dorm and his bed, from which he vanished again.

Back in the Defence classroom, Harry noticed that the two teachers were still there. “What did you want?”

“I have the impression that I know you from somewhere.” Remus started directly. “Am I wrong?”

“I’ve arrived to England only recently.” Harry replied. “If you know me, it must be because you saw me at one point or another.”

“No, no.” Remus said, frowning. “It’s older than that. And there is something else, too.”

“What?” asked Harry, sensing the man’s emotions flaring again.

“Well... what I’m going to say is... quite unusual...” said Remus. “Whatever I say, know that I am like you.”

“What do you mean?” asked Harry, while Sirius looked at his friend apprehensively.

Remus looked sad when he asked the question. “When were you bitten?”

A pause ensued.

‘Damn!’ thought Harry.

An even longer pause followed the first.

“I understand you don’t want to talk about it to a stranger.” Remus finally said. “I know that I wouldn’t. Just know that I’m here, should you want to-”

“Thank you.” said Harry. “But I will answer.” He swallowed. “I have been bitten this summer. My... father, who trained me to be his successor in his dojo – a martial arts training facility, should you ask – and who happens to work indirectly for the Japanese Emperor, has received an anguished call from former students about an unbeatable beast spreading death and chaos. It was July’s full moon, and my father supposed it wise to bring his best weapons with him, because of a superstition regarding the full moon. We both went to Hokkaido and found a wolf-like creature fighting peasants. I should say “slaughtering” peasants.” he shuddered, playing his act. “We went to it, each with a sword, and attacked it. It succeeded in biting me before my father killed it.”

“Killed?” asked Remus suddenly.

“Yes. My father’s katana went through the beast’s chest, and I remember that it howled as if in pain while its grey fur sizzled around the wound.”

Remus looked shocked, and Sirius asked the next question. “What is your father’s... katana... made of?”

“Silver, why?” asked Harry.

“Silver is deadly to werewolves.” the man answered.

Harry nodded, and looked at Remus, who was seemingly lost in deep thoughts.

“Remus?” asked Sirius, but his friend didn’t answer. “Moony?”

The addressed man looked up. “He had grey fur, Sirius.” he paused for a moment, before looking at Harry. “Do you know where the... beast... came from?”

“My father said it was coming from Russia, because there had been an escape in a high-security prison, and a subsequent trail of unresolved and violent crimes leading to Japan.”

They stayed silent for some more time.

“I’m a werewolf too.” admitted Remus. “If you’d like, we can spend the next full moon together. There’s an abandoned house nearby, where nobody can intrude.”

“Thank you.” answered Harry. “I’ll remember that. In the meantime, can you keep the information to yourselves? Since you provided a safe house, I believe no one should know about it.”

Remus acquiesced, knowing what it was to be a werewolf student in a school full of narrow-minded students. “We’ll keep it to ourselves.” he said, throwing an intent look at Sirius before turning to Harry again. “However, if you don’t show yourself in the Entrance Hall at 8pm by Friday next week, we’ll tell Dumbledore and your Head of House immediately.”

Harry nodded. The two men had been truthful, and Remus’ last declaration had been uttered out of concern for the other students, not threateningly. After thanking them again, he left the classroom toward the Great Hall for dinner.

The next morning, Harry was intercepted on his way to the Great Hall by several Slytherin first years.

“What is it?” he asked.

“You told us to see you, if Malfoy...” one of the boys trailed off.

Harry nodded. “What has he done, this time?”

“He took the wands of Joana and Katrin.” the same boy answered.

“Alright.” Harry answered. “Now, all of you act as usual, and I’ll return the girls’ wands as soon as possible.”

He continued to walk toward the Great Hall, a few steps ahead of the first years. While his body was walking, his mind was discussing with Cassie, requesting the location of Malfoy and the girls. As the blond boy was in the Great Hall as well, seeming to eat his breakfast contentedly, Harry didn't change directions, and a crude plan started to form in his mind.

Harry sat right next to Malfoy, who noticed and looked at him with hatred. The blond didn't act on it, though.

He couldn't.

His mind had just been seized by the most powerful Legilimencer in the school, and Harry wasn't holding back. He had started by binding Malfoy's consciousness, absently noticing that Cassie's copy wasn't there anymore, before rummaging through the boy's memories. He then unearthed several curious things, the most interesting being that Malfoy was a Dark Lord's spy in the school. The blond boy also knew that Snape would do everything in his power to ease his life in Hogwarts. The Potion Master was his godfather, and he had also taken an Unbreakable Vow to that effect.

Harry was half-tempted to put Malfoy's Imperius Curse back on himself, but it could be dangerous: if the boy ordered himself to kill someone, he would do it without second thoughts. However, he could play a bit.

Harry started by removing memories of being Snape's favourite. He also found several memories containing dangerous spells he didn't know and, instead of simply removing them, he transferred them to his own mind.

Harry then considered his options. He could fill the boy's mind with anything, really. Thinking of filling brought an idea up, and Harry sent a polite mental request to Ginny. She was surprised about it, then curious. Harry wanted a large slab of memories, and Ginny complied, asking about why he needed them. When Harry explained, he distinctively heard the redhead bursting into laughter at her table, surprising her brothers and Housemates.

Knowing that the girl shared her mother's liking for cooking, he had asked for numerous recipes.

After sorting the memories and removing personal details, Harry copied them to Malfoy's mind as well, and made him think that it was significant information about Hogwarts' security and Dumbledore plans.

Malfoy suddenly looked gleeful and, as inconspicuous as possible, he left the Great Hall for the Owlery, his meal unfinished. Harry then grabbed the conveniently forgotten wands and gave them back to the blond boy's earlier victims.

To be continued in next chapter: Delirium Tremens...

The boy's job is quite messed up,
By a rather big stuck-up.
When will that situation end?
Soon, perhaps. This ain't the end.

Chapter 19 – Delirium Tremens

posted October 22nd, 2005

A week passed quietly for Harry and his friends. Malfoy seemed on tenterhooks but he didn't annoy anyone and didn't complain to Snape anymore. Since the boy needed it for courses, Harry gave him his wand back. After all, with no memory of offensive spells remaining, he couldn't do much harm with it.

Hermione had reinstated the SAGES, and Susan was now the group's official contact in Hufflepuff. It simply meant that Hufflepuffs wanting something from the group could ask her, and other members of the group wanting to reach a Hufflepuff could ask her as well. The Hufflepuff girl took her new task with pleasure, and succeeded in rallying all the first year students of her House to the group.

Harry, for his part, had taken advantage of Malfoy's remoteness to propose the idea of an inter-houses study group to the younger Slytherin students, and it met a fairly impressive approval as well. After all, closed-mindedness wasn't a Slytherin common trait, and studying by taking advantage of other people's work could be understood as ambitious and cunning. Only one first-year and four second-year – Malfoy and his bodyguards as well as Parkinson – didn't participate, but there were many other students interested, ranging from first to third year.

When Friday rolled around, Harry noticed that Remus was in an even shabbier state than usual, and he remembered their deal. The evening came rapidly and he went to the meeting point to find Remus waiting for him, accompanied by a large black dog. Wordlessly, they went outside until they reached the Whomping Willow, where Remus showed Harry a particular root to press. A trapdoor opened, and they walked a subterranean corridor for few minutes, until they found a door.

"There it is." said Remus. "My hideout. Dumbledore had constructed it when I was a student here."

"You went to school here?" asked Harry.

The werewolf acquiesced. "Yes, I was. Same time as a few good friends of mine."

The dog barked, its tail wagging, and Harry nodded. His peripheral Legilimency told him that the dog wasn't really a dog, and he was a bit surprised to recognize Sirius' mind behind the canine grin. He already knew about Sirius being an Animagus, but he hadn't known what shape it was. "I see that you brought your dog," he said.

Remus hesitated before answering. "It's a friend's. I keep it on the occasion."

The man's breathing was suddenly shallower and he sat back. Harry started to feel the moon's influence as well, and knew it was time for starting his plan. He focused on Remus' mind and entered it, immediately jumping over the low barriers. There was a grey mist there, akin to the one he had had in his own mind, and it was swirling angrily. Like he had done the previous year, Harry summoned a vacuum cleaner and transferred most of the mist in his own mind prison. As was the case with his own mind, he couldn't remove all of it, and knew that, like him, Remus would always be uncomfortable in the moonlight. He noticed something else as well. In the man's mind, there was a slab of memory which wasn't connected to the others. It meant that Remus didn't know he had it. He had noticed it because the grey mist, swirling under the moon's influence, had been clinging to this precise slab.

Harry explored it, and understood that it was containing the wolf transformation procedure. It was linked to something, though, and, following the thread, Harry found it had something to do with pain. Remorselessly, he cut that strand off, before linking the memory to the other active ones.

He then jumped back into his own body to find a puzzled werewolf looking at his own body. Remus' breathing had returned to normalcy, and Harry smiled.

“I’m not transforming, Padfoot.” said Remus. “I’m not transforming. What is going on?”

“What do you mean with transforming?” asked Harry innocently.

Remus’ enhanced hearing picked something in the boy’s voice that hinted that it wasn’t that innocent, and the dog barked, having perceived it too.

“What do you mean? You have been bitten, haven’t you? You are going to transform into a wolf-like creature like the one who bit you, and-”

“Actually, I won’t.” Harry said. “And I think you won’t either. Unless you enjoy it, of course.”

“What do you mean?” asked Remus desperately. The man wasn’t understanding half of what was happening to him, now.

“Before I answer, I have a question for you. Both of you.” he added, looking at the dog intently.

Said dog looked back at him with a dog expression akin to disbelief, and Harry smirked. “Stop drooling, Padfoot.” he said, and the dog slammed its mouth shut with an audible clomp.

The boy looked at Remus. “If you had to hide a secret to the whole world – and I mean everyone, Dumbledore included – but in return, you’d be able to see Harry Potter daily, would you?”

The dog and the werewolf looked at each other. Despite not understanding how the boy in front of them could know about their link to James’ son, they still wanted to see him, and they nodded.

“I would.” said Remus, and the dog woofed softly. “And I think Padfoot would, too.”

Harry didn’t really need help from "friends in high places" but it didn’t hurt to have a few teachers on his side. So far, the two of them had

been truthful to him, not giving indication to anyone about his werewolf bite. And he knew the two of them would be happy to know his real identity. On top of that, now that he had "messed" with Remus' werewolf status, they would know something about him wasn't right even if he just let them go. They still belonged to Dumbledore's little group, too, and he would have to work with their Occlumency tonight.

Harry sighed. So many things were so precariously balanced...

Still looking at them intently, he morphed back into his normal self, adding the scar as an afterthought. Remus and the dog gaped.

After a silent minute, the werewolf was the first to react. "Harry? Is that you?"

Harry grinned. "You know, Remus, names really have no meaning."

The werewolf jumped at the familiar sentence, before lunging on the young boy, hugging him. Over the man's shoulder, Harry looked at the dog and smirked. "You can join the hug, Sirius." he said.

The addressed dog looked at him in wonder, before shifting into Sirius. "How... how did you know?" he stuttered.

"It's a part of the big secret I want you to keep." Harry said, looking grave. "Very few people know the truth, and they all are proficient in Occlumency. Enough so to fool people like Snape."

"It must be a small group of people," Remus started musingly, "because Snape is quite the Legilimens."

"Me," Harry started to count on his fingers, "Tracey, Ron, Ginny, and Hermione."

The two teachers were quite stumped. Students could fool Snape in the mind's arts? How was it possible?

"How is it possible?" asked Sirius.

Harry sat, cross-legged, and motioned them to sit as well. He then spent the largest part of an hour explaining about his history, his mental powers, and the real story behind the werewolf's bite. To a bewildered pair, he announced that Remus wouldn't feel the moon's effect as much as before and that he could now transform into a wolf and back at will, with a painless transformation. Remus frowned thoughtfully and, upon finding the appropriate memory, decided to try it on the spot. After prancing around in his wolf shape, an ecstatic Remus lunged at Harry again, hugging him and thanking him profusely.

The three of them focused on their minds next, Harry helping the two adults enhancing their mental walls. They already knew the concepts, and quickly strengthened their outside barriers. They didn't change these barriers' shabby shape, though, in order not to raise suspicion should a Legilimens brush their mind. Their more important memories, though, like Harry's identity and powers, were held in a metal case in the like of a muggle safe box, and buried under the consciousness building so as to still be accessible. Said building was then improved as well, in order to prevent mind-controlling people and spells. Harry simply concealed the real door and added another, leading to a room faking the consciousness centre.

As Harry spent a few minutes in each of the men's mind before switching, they didn't react when he stopped doing so, each of them thinking that he was with the other. It was an hour before midnight, and Harry had sensed his Voldemort-vision outlet activate under the Dark Lord's anger. Even if he suspected the reason behind said anger, he went to inspect it.

The blond boy was blabbering. "...after the treacle, add powdered egg yolks to the mix, and-"

"CRUCIO!" interrupted Voldemort, seething. "Crucio!" he repeated, turning to the horrified woman in front of him.

"I accepted to see him, dear Narcissa, because you told me he had interesting information about Hogwarts' security and Dumbledore

plans.” the Dark Lord hissed angrily, damaging his current host’s voice box in the process. “Is the old man senile enough to base his school defence on recipes?”

The addressed aristocratic woman didn’t answer, still writhing in the throes of the Cruciatus Curse.

“Of course not.” Voldemort answered, before repeating the curse. No one made a fool out of him without suffering greatly. His red eyes glittered with anger, and the gaunt shape of his host looked impressive, bathed in the moonlight pouring from the nearest window.

Harry extracted himself from the scene. It had given him an idea, and he went to Remus’ mind.

Once there, he copied the memory of transforming in a werewolf into his mind. Going there afterwards, he cloned the memory, and spent a few minutes examining it, finding something interesting. Apparently, the slab of memories hosted another identity, complete with the werewolf appearance and personality. There was no rage level indicated, and Harry suspected that it had something to do with the grey mist which was currently swirling angrily in the ball of stone nearby.

Harry then proceeded in modifying the duplicate’s personality, preventing the killing of anyone except wizards and witches clad in black robes and white masks. Since he could also change the werewolf’s appearance in the memory, he quickly removed everything that was dangerous: fangs, claws, and strong muscles. On a whim, he also decided to rid the creature of any fur, leaving an orange scaly skin with bright green polka dots. He knew it didn’t have any interest since his forthcoming victim couldn’t transform, not having the werewolf infectious agent in his blood.

He smirked at the result, before concentrating on the reinforced ball of stone containing the werewolf influence from the Japanese one and from Remus. After storing the updated memory there, he focused on building a one-way passage between it and the reinforced stone building which held the magical mind portal between him and

Voldemort. It took him several minutes, and the two men with him started to wonder what he was doing.

“Harry?” asked Remus, noticing the boy’s concentration. “Are you alright?”

The addressed boy heard the question from the depths of his mind, and made his body nod before returning to the task at hand. Said task included the pushing of everything that was stored in his mind prison to Voldemort. Once it was done, Harry resealed the two stone balls and looked through Voldemort’s vision outlet.

Voldemort was calmer now, but just by a tad bit. The few Death Eaters gathered there knew it, and the two of them with bad news were already writhing on the floor next to the unconscious Malfoys. It was a reduced meeting, as the Dark Lord was gathering intelligence from his Ministry spies and didn’t want his whole body of followers to know about it. Only Macnair and a few spies were here.

In the middle of a report, Voldemort frowned thoughtfully for a few seconds, before his eyes went wide open, looking at the full moon showing at the window. He then opened his mouth and began to scream in pain. The muggle host he inhabited saw all its bones snap under the pressure. However, said host didn’t have an ounce of magical blood in him, and Voldemort couldn’t use it for the transformation he was undergoing.

The dark shape that was Voldemort’s spirit shot out of the muggle, whose body fell like a rag doll, and the Dark Lord’s shape audibly yelled some more, visibly transforming into something... not human. Voldemort’s followers took a step back, but the spirit lunged at them. Voldemort took hold of the first spy, and the man screamed in pain as the darkest spirit of the era tore at his mind, not being able to do so to his flesh.

While Macnair crouched behind Voldemort’s throne, the remaining two spies scattered. Voldemort didn’t spare them, though, and attacked the one at the outside door first, before gliding toward the other. The last spy was trembling, frightened, near the door to

Voldemort's private quarters. He threw himself on his knees but the Dark Lord's spirit didn't spare him, and he died in that position.

The dark spirit hovered for a few seconds before noticing Macnair. The Death Eater began to tremble, but the dark shape tilted its head on the side, before emitting a low sound and exiting the room through the nearest door. Macnair exhaled loudly before darting out, casting a Cleaning charm on his robes on the way. It never entered his head that the Dark Lord had shown mercy uniquely because he hadn't been wearing his mask.

Harry got out of the vision quickly, quite happy to have pushed the Dark Lord toward decimating his own troops. He had been startled, though, by the happenstance with the muggle body. Had Voldemort been able to transform before? Harry knew the Dark Lord wasn't a werewolf, and the only human-animal transformation he knew of was the Animagus one.

Opening his eyes, he looked at Sirius. "How did you learn to transform into that dog?"

Sirius blushed, and Remus smirked before answering in his stead. "He and James searched through old books for a very long time, and pulled it off themselves. I was there, too, thankfully."

"Why so?" asked Harry, the thoughts he unconsciously picked from the man's mind increasing his eagerness.

"Because the potion that is used at the beginning of the Animagus training process includes some werewolf blood." Remus answered.

"So that's why..." Harry started, reflecting about Voldemort's transformation. Although incomplete because of the lack of a useable body, it had still started, and Harry supposed that the Dark Lord must have ingested said Potion or an equivalent at one point, and he therefore must have had the "infectious agent" Harry had pushed away.

A smile on his face, he continued training Remus and Sirius in Occlumency.

It was in the wee hours of the morning that they were finally ready to head back, chatting amiably. The two adults learnt that Harry and Henry Evans were the same person, and Harry, back into Kentaro's shape and identity, learnt that it was by his werewolf-tinged smell that Remus had identified him earlier. Thinking about it, Harry stopped walking before exiting the tunnel.

"I have something to show you." he said, and drew the Unbreakable bottle containing the werewolf's head. Hermione had helped digging up a preservation charm, and the head leered at its onlookers, its dead orbits reflecting Sirius wand's light.

Remus gasped. "Merlin, Kentaro!" he explained, his mind firmly set to call Harry with his apparent identity so as not to draw suspicion. "It's the one who bit me..." he whispered. "It's... It's Fenrir. Fenrir Greyback."

Harry understood the man's emotions and waited for a few seconds before putting the bottle back in his enlarged pocket. He had an additional piece of information, now: the werewolf's name. Remus thanked him again, before looking at the trapdoor apprehensively. The silvery moonlight was still visible around it, and Sirius was reluctant to open it. Passing him, Harry remembered about something and turned toward Remus.

"As you know already, werewolf bites affect the body as well as the mind. I succeeded in blocking both, and I know I can't transform. Silver doesn't affect me much either. In your case, I'm not so sure. In your body, you still are a full-blooded werewolf." he said, and Remus nodded.

"Ready?" the boy asked after a few seconds, and, before Remus could say no, he opened the trapdoor and moonlight flooded the tunnel. Remus stood, transfixed, before smiling at him. It worked! Of course, he was mightily annoyed by the light and wanted to flee from it as soon as possible, but it wasn't changing him into a mindless

killer, and that was an improvement so impressive that he jumped out and hugged Harry once more.

They then returned to the castle to finish the night. When they saw Filch on their way, the man didn't even seem to see them, and Harry smirked. Filch's thought processes had been updated a few days ago, so as to believe that Harry was in detention with him every evening afterwards. Harry had also added an unconscious instruction for the caretaker to always look the other way when meeting him after curfew.

The next evening...

Lord Voldemort had been angry all day. Angry, confused, and quite afraid, actually. He knew someone had messed up with him, but couldn't fathom who, how, why, and how to get rid of it. His mind, although well-protected, wasn't sorted properly, and he didn't find anything unusual there before the evening meeting started.

As he had only "invited" his inner circle, it was a more informal meeting and no one wore a mask. That didn't prevent Voldemort from transforming as soon as the moonlight hit the window, though. Even with his new host a recruit, the body's bones snapped like the previous evening, and Voldemort's spirit stepped "out" of his last – and dead – host. Everybody froze while Macnair started to retreat from the angry-looking shape.

His new personality being in charge, Voldemort was confused. He wanted to attack people with white masks on, but no one had.

The room's door opened unexpectedly, and all Death Eaters jumped before half-turning toward the intruder. It was a new recruit with a mask on, who closed the door after him. As soon as he turned to face the silent group, though, Voldemort noticed his garb, and lunged at him. The newcomer froze in panic and no one had moved either, something which didn't help the young man's life expectancy.

Mere seconds afterwards, Voldemort's spirit rose from the dead wizard's body before looking around again, confused.

Wheels clicked in the mind of several onlookers. "He searches for masks." Rodolphus Lestrangle stated. "Let's warn the recruits."

Since Malfoy's demise and the Azkaban breakout, the power had shifted within Voldemort's Inner Circle. The Lestrangle brothers had recovered first from their imprisonment, and were now practically seconding Voldemort. Using their newfound authority, and the knowledge that at least one of their enemies used a sword, they had pushed the other Death Eaters to learn fencing. After all, they had reasoned, most purebloods had family swords, so there was no point in not using them.

Fortunately for the recruits, there weren't many of them that evening, because Voldemort's morphed spirit shot out and killed them as soon as they came within view. Between the two evenings, the Death Eaters lost seven members.

Hogwarts' Great Hall, the next morning...

Harry was enjoying a good Sunday breakfast without Malfoy, chatting amiably with Tracey, when the girl looked behind him inquiringly. Harry had felt the arrival already, but he knew that the older boy wasn't a threat. He turned around.

"Hi, Garnet." he said. Since he lived in Slytherin, he had started using their habits, and one of them was to avoid calling them by their forenames. He had learnt – and Ron had confirmed – that it was an old pureblood tradition to reserve forenames to really close friends.

"Hi, Anderson. Are you going to participate to the Quidditch tryouts?" Garnet asked.

Harry thought about it. Of course, the registration sheets had been on the common room's wall for a week, now, but he hadn't thought of participating. In fact, he thought that his enhanced sense and Legilimency would be cheating. He shook his head.

"Why?" asked Garnet.

That puzzled Harry. Why would the boy ask him that very question? He voiced that thought, and Garnet's answer surprised him – even though he "heard" it before it was uttered.

The older teen leaned to his ear. "Because you could be captain." he said in a low voice.

"Captain? Me? You've got to be kidding! I'm only in second year!"

"I'm not. I'm not kidding, I mean. I saw you motivate the first years on your first day of school, and they have been gaining points in their studies since then. If you can do the same with Quidditch players, it would be fantastic."

Harry thought about it. "Can't I do that without playing? And what would the current captain say?"

"Flint, the previous captain, has seen his status removed because he is repeating a year. Snape had delegated the choice of a captain to us prefect." he answered, before looking at Harry shrewdly. "You don't want to play?"

"Well... it's not that, but..."

"Come on, and give it a try, okay? We start at nine."

Defeated, Harry nodded. Tracey stood up and patted his shoulder. "Relax, it'll be alright." she said, before leaving to prepare for the tryouts herself. Contrarily to him, she had put her name on the registration list, applying for a Chaser position. Harry finished his breakfast gloomily. He hadn't wanted to put himself in the light, and he was now forced to do so. He didn't even know what position he wanted!

He left the Hall and headed for the Slytherin dungeons, thinking that his day couldn't get worse, when it did. Walking in the opposite direction, coming from said dungeons, were the two persons he loathed over everyone. Snape and Malfoy. The boy seemed to have quite recovered from his ordeal, surely thanks to a batch of Snape's

miraculous potions. His constantly twitching face was the only external indicator of the torture he had endured two days ago.

The two males walked past him, not even noticing him – or hiding it pretty well – and Harry had to stand flat against the wall to avoid being hit by what Snape was holding in his arms. Brooms. Seven brooms. Sleek and looking brand new. And Malfoy was clad with the customary garb for a Slytherin Quidditch player, impeccably ironed.

Harry groaned. ‘Trust Malfoy to buy his way in.’ he thought, and the echoes of the conversation between the blond boy and the Potion professor confirmed it.

“...make me captain?” Malfoy was asking eagerly, just before exiting the Entrance Hall.

“Of course.” answered Snape, following him outside.

Shaking his head in disbelief, Harry went to his dorm to change. His trunk was still in front of his bed, and he knew it was still trapped since his first evening in the school. He didn’t care, though, as it only contained crude clothes he had transfigured from trash before school. His real trunk was around his neck all the time. He passed his bed curtains, entering the space he had enlarged several days ago. His bed was only taking a small place of it, now, and there were two comfortable chairs as well as a large desk where he could study in peace. Since it was better for storage, he had also transfigured a splinter into a cupboard where he had stored most of his clothes. He didn’t have anything resembling Quidditch garb, though, and took a napkin from his schoolbag to transfigure it into an unidentifiable Quidditch outfit. He then shed his school robes to don the thing.

Still cursing internally about Malfoy and Snape, he left the Slytherins’ quarters and headed outside, toward the Quidditch pitch, wordlessly crossing an empty-handed Snape on the way.

A disgruntled prefect welcomed him. “I’m sorry, Anderson, but I must rescind my previous offer. Snape just made Malfoy captain.”

Harry's eyes acquired an angered glint, but it wasn't directed at the prefect. "I can still participate for the tryouts, can't I?"

The other boy nodded. "Of course, of course." he said, advancing toward the stands.

Harry followed him. "What are the needed positions?"

"Flint had the habit of taking only friends in the team and, despite their will to win, they weren't on par with the Gryffindor, regarding their skill. We are holding full tryouts, now." Garnet said, taking a sheet of parchment from the table on the stand. "We have fifteen candidates for the three Chaser spots, nine for the two Beaters, three for the Keeper, and Malfoy had been given the Seeker position, ousting the two other contenders."

Harry thought about it. "Sign me up for Keeper, please. I'm sure that, with the numerous contenders for the Beaters and Chasers, we will be able to find viable ones."

"Right." answered Garnet, writing Harry's name on the sheet. "Go on the pitch, then. The Keepers are the first to be tested. Against the prospective Chasers." he added with a smirk.

Harry nodded, and climbed down the stands. Once on the pitch, he noticed that Karin Guckmal, the beautiful but haughty seventh year Prefect, was herding the contestants in three different groups, and he joined the smallest. He then remarked that it was formed by the bulky Millicent Bulstrode, as well as two older students who were broad-shouldered as well, Bletchley, who had been holding the position last year, and Derrick.

During the tryouts, though, they found out that being large and strong wasn't the only requirement to play Keeper. One had to be swift enough, and able to anticipate the enemy moves. The four of them were tested against each of the Chasers individually, then in formation. Despite the Chasers' lack of skill and training, Bulstrode let half of the attempts pass. Derrick wasn't having much more chance.

Bletchley had had training, and only one in five went through the hoops. Harry, however...

Harry knew the Chasers' tactics before they were applied, and could have easily blocked all of the attempts if that hadn't been too noticeable. He also felt the Chasers' relative skill and will to play, and arranged to let pass the balls from the three most promising and enthusiastic Chasers.

Malfoy cursed, whined, and sneered all he wanted, but the scores were what they were, and the selection process had been left to the Prefects. Harry was selected as Keeper, and Tracey as Chaser. The other two Chasers were Wendy Fawcett and Adrian Pucey, both fourth-year and the latter keeping his position from last year. That left the Beaters to choose and, quite surprisingly, Crabbe and Goyle were quite proficient in playing that position, unlike anything academic that could be thrown their way.

After congratulating the chosen ones, the prefects left the team to Malfoy's care and left for lunch. The blond boy seemed to swallow his pride at seeing that at least two members of the team weren't dedicated to him. He made a half-hearted attempt at a pep talk, insisting on his own role as Seeker and, incidentally, broom provider. Said brooms were black with unrecognisable writings on them, and their twigs were silver. Malfoy explained that they came from Russia, and that his father had bought them before being – unjustly – arrested.

Each of them took one, and felt the cold touch of the handles, as well as a heating charm kicking in.

“Because of Russia's weather, the heating charm is built-in.” said Malfoy. “If we play under the sun, we'll have to remove the charm beforehand.”

He didn't say anything else and turned on his heels, going for the Slytherin quarters, quickly followed by Crabbe and Goyle. The other four looked at his departing back in wonder.

“He’s even worse than Flint.” grumbled Pucey.

Harry looked at the Chasers and had a sudden idea. Malfoy could be the Seeker and official captain of the team, but he, Harry, would lead the attack and defence. “That’s why we must stay together.” he said vehemently, to their surprise.

“We need to build a strong Quidditch team.” he continued. “But the Seeker and Beaters are accessories. Everyone knows that a Quidditch game’s score often reach the 400 points. Our job in making more than half of those points, and preventing the other side from taking them, is essential.”

They nodded, and Tracey’s expression was proud despite her small smirk.

“I have an idea.” Harry said. “Since you three are going to play together, you must start to think alike. You must try to learn each other’s habits so that you’ll instinctively know where your allies are, and when they want to give you the Quaffle or take it from you. Without even looking.” he added.

“How is that even possible?” asked Fawcett.

“We are going to live together, and there won’t be a word exchanged between you. When eating, you will learn to pass dishes without being asked for them verbally. You are going to learn to distinguish the small signs that are each other’s non-verbal communication. And after a while, it will become instinctual.” he stated, trying to motivate them. Despite not knowing if it would work, the three Chasers seemed to agree with his method and he smiled. ‘And I’ll update your minds slightly so that it will be even easier.’ he thought.

“We will trounce our adversaries,” Harry started again, “and nothing Malfoy will come up with will change that. We will need our strength, though, and our first step toward a healthy body is a healthy meal. Alright?”

“Alright!” the three of them answered, before jumping at the others’ voices. They had been taken by the speech and had answered without thinking about it.

Harry smiled. “Good! Let’s get to lunch, then.”

During the meal, Harry kept silent, and the other three did the same, trying to see how they could discern each other’s needs without words. During the course of the meal, though, they found themselves doing it easily, and even without looking. His mind-altering operation done, Harry sat back and enjoyed a quiet dessert.

Another week passed by. The other Houses held their Quidditch tryouts as well, and the lessons sped a bit, quickly reaching cruising speed. Something else went into full speed too and, Sunday morning, the Weasley twins sat at their table with a wide grin.

Ginny noticed it within seconds. “What have you done?”

“Us? Nothing.” asked Fred.

“We are completely innocent.” assured George, the hand on his heart.

At the same time, a ruckus started on the farthest table. Ginny and Ron understood its meaning and paled suddenly. “Tell us you haven’t pranked the Slytherins.” Ron demanded.

“Why?” asked Fred innocently. “It didn’t seem to disturb you, before.”

“Did you prank all of them?” asked Ginny.

“Actually, we didn’t do as much as prank them.” answered George.

“After all, they should just beware of what they drink.” stated Fred with a serious look.

“True.” George continued. “After all, alcohol consumption in the school premises is a dangerous thing.”

The two youngest Weasley groaned and turned to evaluate the damage done. Most of the Slytherin were now singing heartedly and laughing madly. Some of them were snoring loudly on the table.

Whatever the twins had pulled up, the whole Slytherin student body seemed completely drunk.

Suddenly, at the Ravenclaw table, a girl screamed, her hands to her ears, and tried to stand before falling on the floor.

“Strange...” started Fred.

“We didn’t prank the Ravensclaws.” finished George.

The two of them got their gaze drawn by Ron. The boy was in visible pain, holding his head. When blood started to dribble from his nose, he fell unconscious. The other Weasleys began to wonder, but Ginny quickly made the connection. First Hermione, then Ron, just after a prank on the Slytherins. She looked at the end of the Slytherin table where Harry and the Chasers were always taking their meals since last Sunday, and noticed Harry’s look of despair. The boy had had the presence of mind of hiding under his cloak, and she suspected that a drunken Metamorphmagus could provide quite the show.

As she started to stand, intending to go to him, she felt his presence in her mind. It was wild and uncontrolled, and gave her a headache like she had rarely had in her life. Visibly, though, Harry was trying to contain himself. Judging from the state of Hermione and Ron, if he hadn’t, she would have screamed as well.

‘Help.’ was all she could hear, until the presence retreated. Her sight working again, she noticed that Harry had rolled under the table, like several other Slytherins. Snape had moved quickly when the commotion had started, and was trying to restore their state unsuccessfully, under Sirius’ amused gaze.

“What is the counter spell?” she whispered intently to her twin brothers.

“Why?” whined Fred. “It’s so much fun...”

She sighed. She would have to talk to Harry about them someday. “Because I have friends there, that’s why.”

The two of them sighed, and muttered the appropriate words, their wand under the table.

The spell coincided with one of Snape’s and didn’t wake the Slytherin Head of House’s suspicion when the students returned to their normal self. A few couples of older students had been snogging each other wildly and they separated, smoothing their clothes and blushing, while the ones who had been under the table peeked over it with wide eyes. The sight was funny anyways, and the Hall erupted in laughter.

“See, Ginny?” asked Fred.

“Everyone loves our pranks.” finished George.

The girl nodded absently. Hermione and Ron were still out, and Harry hadn’t reappeared from under the table. Ginny crossed Tracey’s gaze, and the Slytherin’s shake of head brought fear in her mind. If Harry had disappeared before the twins cast the counter spell...

“Come.” she said, standing up.

“Why?” asked George.

“We haven’t finished our delicious bacon.” said Fred, putting his loaded fork in his mouth.

“Because we need to take Ron to the infirmary, you overgrown prats!” she exclaimed.

“Hasn’t he fallen asleep?” asked Fred.

George was on the verge of finishing his twin's sentence but, seeing Ron's pale and bloodied face, he abstained. The three of them followed the group of Ravenclaws who had taken the same route with Hermione's prone body.

After facing Madam Pomfrey, and after being assured that the two of them were going to be fine, the accompanying teams left to finish breakfast. That's what the Weasley twins thought, anyways. When they got stopped by Ginny near the staircase leading to the upper floors, they looked at her with questioning gazes.

'I hope I'm not making a huge mistake.' she thought, before opening her mouth. "I need your help."

"What for?" asked George.

"To pull a prank like this on someone else?" Fred finished with a smirk.

"No!" she exclaimed, before sighing. "I know you have a map of Hogwarts with people on it." Blushing, she admitted eavesdropping on them a few times.

Their look wasn't one of anger, though. The twins looked at her with pride, and slapped her back. "At last, another Weasley following our steps!" exclaimed Fred.

"Don't forget that that road had been built by the Marauders, though." stated George sternly. "We are merely following their illustrious steps."

"The Marauders?" asked Ginny. "Who are they?"

Fred looked at her with his eyes wide. "You don't know the Marauders?"

"Legend has it that they were the four most accomplished pranksters to walk these halls." stated George solemnly. "And we intend-

“Whatever.” she said, interrupting him. “I need that map, and I need you, too.”

“Why?” they asked.

“Because! I can’t explain now.” she said, tugging at their sleeve from the staircase’s third step. ‘I hope Harry will, in fact.’ she thought.

Sensing that their sister had an idea behind her head, the twins resisted.

“Very well.” Fred said. “If we help you...” he stopped, frowning.

George looked at his brother, then at Ginny. “You’ll have to test our jokes for a week.”

Testing the jokes Fred and George were creating was one of the most dangerous activity on Earth, and Ginny rarely accepted, especially since she had started school. To their surprise, she acquiesced, merely closing her eyes in defeat.

“Are you coming, now?” she asked urgently, but they didn’t follow. In fact, Ginny was suddenly rooted to her spot as well, as an infernal noise was coming from upstairs, heading their way.

Peeves, the castle’s poltergeist, was floating down in a hurry, his face contorted in an expression none of them had seen him wearing: fear. Attached to his feet was a rattling set of pans and metal pots. Behind him, a man was running as well. It was a distorted man, with legs long like twice his body, and holding a translucent and ghost-like tub in his hand. His face was full of scars, and he was yelling at the fleeing poltergeist.

“Com’ here, Peeves, ye c’ward!” he slurred. “I’m not done wit’...”

He stopped suddenly and looked at Ginny. Recognition seemed to strike his features, and he winked, his face seeming to melt from the movement. He noticing Peeves going through a nearby wall, though,

and that attracted his attention. "Not fair!" he exclaimed, before disappearing as well before the three students could do anything. The three of them heard a much fainter sound of clatter when the ghost was caught by Harry again.

"Who was that?" asked Fred absently.

"It wasn't one of the castle's ghosts." answered George, looking at the spot where Harry had disappeared.

"We saw all of them."

"Even the one in the sewer."

"Awful, that one."

"And smelly, too."

Ginny coughed, not-so-discreetly, and they looked at her. "Can we go, now?" she asked urgently.

They didn't answer, and continued to look at her.

"What?" she asked.

"Your... your hair!" started Fred.

"It's fiery!" exclaimed George.

"I know!" she said, passing her hand through her fiery red mane. To her brother's surprise, she didn't even flinch.

"Err... Ginny?"

"You really should see yourself in a mirror."

She acquiesced and climbed the stairs, with her worried brothers in tow. Once in the Gryffindor common room, she followed them to their dorm and went to the bathroom. And screamed.

“My hair!”

As the twins had said, it was fiery. Literally fiery. Cold flames were enhancing it, casting light around her as well. Drawing her wand, she tried to cancel the spell unsuccessfully, before remembering Harry’s wink. ‘He must have charmed it or something.’ she thought. Water didn’t seem to do anything either and, thinking about it, she decided let them stay that way. It wasn’t ugly, and it was even better than her brother’s usual jokes made of a mere change in one’s hair colour.

Speaking of her brothers...

She bolted from the bathroom just as they were recovering the precious parchment from George’s trunk. With her hair casting strange lights around, they spoke the activation sentence, touching the parchment with their wand.

“I solemnly swear I’m up to no good.”

The map activated, and Ginny grasped it from their hands.

“Hey!”

She kept it behind her back. “I need it, but I can’t explain why now.” she said but, seeing their expressions, she sighed. “I did accept to help you with your jokes, didn’t I?”

They looked at each other then at her. “So?” asked Fred.

“I’ll do it two weeks if you don’t ask question, and if you follow me. I want you to cast the counter-spell to this morning’s prank on the person I will lead you to. Deal?”

They looked at each other again. Ginny, volunteering as a joke target? That was too good to be true.

“Deal.” Fred said, shaking her hand.

George looked stumped, though. He had wanted to ask why or even up the ante, since she seemed determined to do it, but his brother had shook, and he followed.

Ginny looked at the map and, using the features she had seen her brothers use numerous times, zoomed around until she found what she was looking for. Or not.

It was easy to find him, in fact, because almost all students were still in the Great Hall. It wasn't a point labelled "Harry Potter" though, but a point which legend didn't stop changing, and which seemed to blink. Sometimes, it just blinked where it was, and some other times, it blinked to reappear somewhere else. She frowned. Like the others, she knew Harry had many secrets, but she hadn't known he could disappear like that in Hogwarts. After all, it was supposed to be impossible to Apparate in Hogwarts.

She put the map in tracking mode, designating herself as the hunter and the blinking point as the prey. She knew that the map would then show the shortest path between them, updating itself should any of them move. She started running, her brothers in tow.

On the way, the twins noticed that a few paintings were hanging upside down, their inhabitants being quite annoyed and unwilling to help. Ginny didn't need the portraits' help, though, as she followed the faithful map all along.

She finally found him near the Great Hall. “Harry!” she exclaimed, still running. The addressed boy looked at her with unfocused eyes, before smiling. He opened his arms and, in an accelerated rush, took her in them. He made her turn like that, squealing in pleasure as her feet left the ground, before grabbing her and kissing her soundly. Full on the lips. And he disappeared.

“What was that?” asked Fred.

Ginny couldn't quite answer, breathing hard from the experience she had just experienced. Harry Potter, the boy on whom she had a crush the size of Hogwarts, had just kissed her!

When George repeated his twin brother's sentence, she jumped. "Did you cast the counter-spell?" she asked, but their face told her they didn't, and she sighed. Even if it was fun for the moment, a drunken Harry could cause many problems, her fiery hair being the smallest one.

Harry seemed to be in a bathroom right now, and they headed that way, only to find that he had just appeared at the Great Hall entrance once again. This time, the dot was labelled "Prof. Squirrell."

They didn't know what Harry was doing, saying, or even looking like when he entered the large room, but he disappeared soon afterwards, and the assembled dots on the Great Hall map began to move frantically. From down the corridor, they heard the Headmaster yell for calm, and the dots representing the students froze.

Ginny didn't, though. The auto-updating map showed Harry on the Quidditch pitch, and she hurried outside. If Harry entered the nearby Forbidden Forest in his state...

He didn't, though. He was flying around the pitch, yelling in obvious joy. The only thing was... he wasn't riding a broom! He wasn't riding anything at all, in fact. Just... flying.

Spotting them, he approached and, suspended upside down in midair, yelled "Come on, it's fun!" before grabbing Ginny's hands. Fred and George tried to grab her, but Harry frowned at them and they suddenly found themselves devoid of clothes, forcing them into a natural reaction of hiding their private parts.

As Ginny was being taken in the air, she had the presence of mind to yell to her brothers. "Cast the spell! The counter-spell!" she exclaimed, before being silenced by the speed at which Harry was carrying her through the air. Not wanting to be dropped, she grabbed him tightly and prayed for her brothers to still have their wands.

She felt a couple of spells hitting her in the back and side, and reflected that, at their speed, it wasn't easy for Fred and George to take a good aim. They finally succeeded, and Harry stopped flying.

They dropped toward the ground.

Ginny yelled in fright, holding Harry even tighter, but he disappeared with her, only to reappear on the grass near her brothers.

"You attacked me?" he asked them in a disbelieving tone.

"Err... not quite." Fred answered, blushing at his state of undress.

"Ginny asked us to cast... a counter-spell... on you." completed George.

"Who are you, by the way?" asked Fred. "I don't remember seeing you in Slytherin."

Harry frowned, and bent to grab a handful of grass, which he quickly transfigured in two large outer robes. He gave them to the nude twins and they thanked him before putting them on. As if on cue, a couple of adults exited the nearby castle entrance right afterwards. Harry closed his eyes, quickly checking his aspect with his Metamorphmagus powers and changing back the bits that weren't Kentaro's. His identity followed suit immediately, and he opened his eyes to see Albus Dumbledore and McGonagall closing in on them. An Albus Dumbledore with strange facial hair.

"What happened to your hair, Headmaster?" he asked, genuinely curious.

A short time earlier, in the Great Hall...

People were talking about the last prank pulled against the Slytherins, and Tracey was quite worried about Harry. She was finishing her meal, though, practising the nonverbal communication between her and the two other Chasers. They were now sufficiently trained to feel each other's need, and could react accordingly. For instance, it

wasn't uncommon for them to chat with their neighbours and then grab the salt and pass it to each other: they had felt the other's need.

When the strange man entered the hall, she had been quite surprised. He looked like an old teacher who was thought as dead, and he had... something, which looked like an enlarged squirrel tail.

"A troll! A troll in the dungeons!" Harry yelled in a falsetto voice, before falling on his knees. He looked at Dumbledore intently, before falling to the ground and disappearing.

The ensuing chaos was calmed by the Headmaster who, despite having suffered a sudden hair growth spurt, had kept his authority. The man was looking strange, though, his white hair being long enough to reach the floor, and ruffled enough so that he was effectively clad in it.

The Headmaster told them to stay still, while he investigated the problem, and the Heads of House would take care of their immediate problems. He then grasped his amulet and headed out, motioning his Deputy Headmistress to follow him.

They went outside and found the four children together. When the boy he knew as Kentaro Anderson asked him about his hair, he returned the question.

"What about you, Miss Weasley?" he asked to a girl visibly unflustered by the fire in her hair.

"I don't know, sir." she said. A long time ago, she had been instructed by Harry not to lie much around the Headmaster. "There was a ghost following Peeves in the corridor, and he winked at me before following the poltergeist through the wall. Next thing I know, Fred and George were looking at me strangely."

"And what are you doing outside?" asked McGonagall.

"We couldn't put her fiery hair out..." started Fred.

“...even though we put water on it.” continued his twin.

“So we thought about putting...

“...her whole head underwater...”

“...in the lake.”

Following the two of them as they bantered was like watching a quick-paced tennis game, and the peripheral Legilimency wasn't working as well in these cases.

“What about you?” Dumbledore asked Harry.

“I found the fire on her hair beautiful and interesting, sir.” he answered with a poker face, and Ginny blushed to the compliment. “And they allowed me to follow them.”

“Very well.” said Dumbledore. After a few thoughtful seconds, he asked “Do you want me to try to put it out?”

“No, sir.” Ginny answered. “I mean... no, thank you, Headmaster. Finally, it doesn't disturb me much, and the effect, although surprising at first, isn't ugly.” she finished, blushing even more.

Smiling and nodding, Dumbledore repeated “Very well.” before returned to the castle, McGonagall in tow.

When they disappeared through the entrance, the twins turned on Harry and Ginny. “Now, would you tell us why we just lied to the Headmaster?”

Harry looked at Ginny, who shrugged. She loved her brothers to bits, but didn't know if they were able to keep Harry's secrets to themselves. Harry could judge their character better than anyone, and she preferred letting him choose about it. While answering so to his mental question, she still said that she preferred Fred and George with them instead of outside the loop. Harry nodded, and looked at the twins intently.

The two teens started to feel uncomfortable under the inquisitive gaze, but the feeling left as soon as it came. They had the sudden impression that it was like speaking to Dumbledore, only stronger and more ruthless.

After a moment, Harry smiled at them, and Ginny did, too, knowing what would follow. Harry gave her a few instructions mentally and left them. His own memories, now easily accessible despite their jumbled state, told him that something had to be done for his close friends first.

While Ginny dragged the twins to an isolated place on the lake shore, Harry went to the infirmary to heal Ron and Hermione's wounded minds. When they awoke, a bit later, he asked for forgiveness, and they gave it freely, knowing that it wasn't exactly his fault. He then reassured Tracey about his own fate before returning to Ginny and the twins. A crash course in Occlumency was scheduled.

The minds of Harry's closest friends were completely protected, even against Obliviation, but Harry knew he couldn't do that much for the twins in the short time he had. He thus repeated the procedure he created with Sirius and Remus, only storing the teens' most important secrets in safes burrowed under their minds' consciousness building. This done, they all relaxed.

"Harry?" asked George. "Why are you hiding? I mean... wouldn't it be simpler to just be yourself?"

Harry thought about it. "You know, there are several reasons, but the first is because it has become a habit. I was spied upon first, and my family got kidnapped, so I got the habit of hiding. Call me paranoid, if you want, but I assure you it was survival, at that time." He thought about it for a few seconds, frowning. "On top of that, Snape said something about Voldemort seeking me, and I wonder..."

He fell silent and the others didn't say anything for a few minutes as well.

“It’s weird to call you Harry...” Fred said, shaking his head. “And to think that you are in Slytherin...”

“Just call me Kentaro, please. Or better yet, Anderson. That way, it won’t raise the attention of the Slytherin purebloods. Speaking of which, what’s about the Slytherin part?”

“They are... our enemies?” asked Fred, but he wasn’t as convinced as if he was speaking to a fellow Gryffindor.

“Don’t you think it’s stupid to fight over Houses?” Harry asked. “I mean... it’s not as if you had a choice, is it?”

The twins seemed to reflect about it, and George asked the next intelligent question. “If we can’t use the Slytherins as target for our pranks, who are we going to choose?”

Harry looked at him with wide eyes, before remembering the twins’ mentality. He frowned. “Do you think your last one was well-thought?”

“We didn’t have all the cards in hand for that one, true. But we can personalize the pranks so that you won’t be affected by them.”

“You’d better.” Harry said. “I’d hate to get even. But it’s settled anyways. After all, we are even, now.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think you looked fine, last month, with that pain plastered on your face.” Harry said, before standing up. “I don’t know about you, but I’m getting hungry all of a sudden. Ready for lunch?” he asked Ginny with an amused sparkle in his eyes.

“Of course.” she answered, equally amused at the twins’ baffled expression. She took his proffered hand and they left toward the castle. It took the twins a couple of minutes to process the information and to finally react, but Harry and Ginny were already far.

“Ginny?” asked Harry.

“Hmmm?”

“How did you find me? I mean... I wasn’t quite "myself" at that time, and I remember jumping from place to place.”

“The twins have a map of Hogwarts, charmed to display everyone on it. The dot for you didn’t stop changing its label and it was jumping around, but I knew it was you.”

Harry was thoughtful. “You say the label changed?”

She nodded. “Yes. I remember that the name holding for the longest time was something like Prof Squirrel.”

Harry smirked. If that was correct, it meant that even magical means to get people identity would report him as the person he faked.

Soon after, they reached the Great Hall for lunch, and separated to get to their own tables.

During said meal, Harry finished categorizing his memories of when he had been "drunk" and found out that he had been able to push his powers in directions not taken before. Ginny’s hair, for example, was something unexpected. It drew a bit of attention from the other students, and some older girls even looked at the literally fiery mane with envy.

The other thing he never did before was flying... without a broom, that is. Sure, he did it while Apparating, and he had been able to levitate things or persons before, even himself. But flying? His memory of it felt good, though, and he vowed to do it some more... in a more discreet setting.

And there was his memory of a kiss, too. He had asked her forgiveness, but she had blushed, saying that it didn’t disturb her. From his initial interview with the girl, he knew she liked him, but he still didn’t realize to which extent. Boys...

The meal was coming to an end, but the dessert didn't appear immediately, and the Headmaster, now devoid of the additional hair, stood to make an announcement which concerned everybody.

"Last year," he started, "an interesting proposal had been made by a student and visibly supported by several others. The Board of Governors didn't think it was appropriate at that time, but they recently changed their mind about it." he said, before pausing for effect. "From now on, there will be a set of inter-house common rooms for students wanting to relax, play, and even play music during their free periods. And study, of course." he added, as if it was an afterthought, but everyone understood that it wasn't, and most students smiled.

"On that topic, I happen to know that there is already a quite successful inter-house study group. The SAGES, as they are called, is reportedly an important group of second and first year of all houses. With people like you, the professors will soon be unable to follow!" he joked, and some laughter was heard in the hall. When the room was calm again, the man continued. "Said rooms are located opposite the exit of this very Hall, so that the studious and relaxing students wouldn't miss a meal." he stated, smiling. "In case you didn't notice when coming to eat today, the entrance is the old classroom eleven."

"On a side note, unrelated to your current studies, I want to inform you that, in the future, Hogwarts will welcome younger students. That pre-schooling option will be proposed on a voluntary schedule. We are currently preparing leaflets for the families of those children to inform them of the possibility."

"Now that this is out of the way, I will leave you to the happiness of a much awaited-for dessert." he finished before sitting, and said dessert appeared on the tables. Before everyone could start, though, a clapping sound came from the student body. Four redheads from Gryffindor, as well as two girls from Ravenclaw and Slytherin were applauding the Headmaster's speech, quickly followed by the other SAGES, and then by the whole student body. Dumbledore nodded

his thanks, and the clapping died down, only to be replaced by the sound of silverware clanking on the cake platters.

After the meal, Dumbledore returned to his office, where a soberly-clad woman was waiting for him.

“Dumbledore.” she said, acknowledging his presence although she had been in his office before him.

The man trusted her, now, and nodded back. “Rita.” he replied.

“ I couldn’t refrain from visiting your Great Hall during your announcement.” she said. “It seems that you saw well, as usual. The students did appreciate your moves.”

“They don’t know that it involved you fetching some dirt on several Board members, though, and I know that this particular move will stay between us.”

“Of course, Dumbledore.” she said, and the old man’s peripheral Legilimency confirmed the woman’s sincerity. Each time the two of them had this kind of discussion, it baffled the Headmaster. The woman’s previous personality would have jumped on the information and published it in a jiffy, whereas she was now playing more the role of a quiet and obedient spy rather than an audience-seeking journalist.

Thinking of the changes he had just told the students about, he wondered about Harold Thomson again. The boy had been at the origin of the decision, but he hadn’t been there to benefit from them. And Dumbledore couldn’t even write him about it.

The tracking spell the Headmaster had put on the toucan had revealed that they came from a magical post office in Rio de Janeiro, and Dumbledore had tried sending a few letters to Harold Thomson there. The owls had always come back with their message untouched. The following Wednesday...

Severus Snape, Potion Master and Professor, was angry. It was lunchtime and he couldn't leave his Potion classroom because of the mess caused by the Ravenclaw-Hufflepuff class he had had that morning. While he had been scolding the Lovegood-Bennett Ravenclaw pair, the Jones-Williams Hufflepuff pair had managed to fail their brewing process so much that their cauldron exploded, sending sticky goo everywhere. This kind of events happened everyday in that particular classroom but, that time, the goo was highly resistant to magic and smelled worse than rotten eggs or dragon dung.

The room was unavailable for class, then, and its teacher was busy cleaning it with the help of a few older students being scheduled for detention that afternoon. The second-year Gryffindors and Slytherins were scheduled to have Potions at that time, but were devoid of teacher and classroom. They wanted to take advantage of a freed period to play outside, but Snape had other ideas, and he gave them an additional load of homework – to keep them occupied for the duration of the missed lesson, at the minimum.

Harry wasn't pleased either, but it wasn't in direct relation with the subject of Potions. Since he had remembered, while discussing with the twins, a few words that Snape had said to him during the summer, he had been waiting for his Potion lesson to be able to access Snape's mind. As said mind was still highly protected, the boy needed the duration of the whole double period to access it properly – and discreetly. Harry couldn't find any other moment with the man alone, and Snape's personal quarters were warded like no other.

With a sigh, he leaned on the Potion essay. Like his classmates, he had much to do to finish it on time.

Four days later, in a remote cottage in Little Hangleton...

It had taken two weeks, but the Dark Lord had been able to repeat Harry's feat.

The grey mist that he knew wasn't in his mind before had been concentrated in one place. Voldemort knew that it was temporary, as it would swirl angrily again at the next full moon. His own research

had deemed that his transformation into an animal was due to the potion he had taken to determine his possible animal shape, several years ago. He had hoped for a Basilisk or some other powerful reptile, but the potion hadn't yielded any result.

Through his intensive introspection, Voldemort had also determined that the grey mist was made of two distinctive colours, one clearer than the other, and he had separated the two quite easily.

Now, in front of him, were two of his most loyal followers. Followers he knew were powerful and totally committed to his cause. Through questions and mind search, he had also determined that they had never tried the Animagus potion, and it suited him.

His wand drawn, he prepared to send the two sets of grey mist into the minds of Rodolphus and Rastaban Lestrangle.

“Legilimens.”

At the same time, someone else was in close contact with a werewolf's blood.

Remus and Sirius had discussed between them and, as they both agreed, they had prepared a certain potion for Harry to use, and the boy was now imbibing the Animagus revealing potion in the Defence Against the Dark Arts teachers' office.

Unfortunately, none of those three knew that, by forcefully rejecting Fenrir Greyback's infectious agent in the summer, Harry had brought himself an immunity to werewolf blood, and the potion failed to provide anything useful. Only pain.

Since the potion was supposed to act painlessly, the two teachers were quite surprised to see the boy writhing on the floor. They dropped to their knees next to him, not knowing what to do, but Harry stopped struggling suddenly, and sat up, his eyes still closed.

“What's happening?” asked Sirius, looking inquiringly at Remus. “You didn't botch the potion, did you?”

Remus shook his head, but the other man wasn't even looking.

"Harry, how are-" he started, before gasping.

Harry had opened his eyes and was looking at the two men. Telling who he was looking at exactly was difficult since his eyes lacked the usual pupil. They were completely blue, and swirling, like beads made of water. At the same time, his skin turned scaly and his hair transformed into colourful feathers.

"This boy has rejected this power for the time being." he said with a voice that wasn't his own.

"Harry?" asked Sirius.

"This is not my name."

"Who are you, then?" asked Remus.

"I am his Nahual." the creature answered, before its features faded away.

The two stunned teachers looked at him in wonder, but the scales and feathers finished receding, leaving a panting Harry sitting on the floor.

"What happened?" he asked them.

"Harry... your eyes!" gasped Sirius.

"What?" he said, before noticing the difference in his eyesight. "Not again!" he groaned, knowing what it meant. Bringing his Metamorphmagus powers to the fore, he promptly returned them to normal-looking eyeballs. He checked his whole body afterwards, but everything else was his usual shape.

When he looked up, he noticed the two concerned gazes turned his way.

“What?” he asked again. “It didn’t work, did it? You said it wasn’t supposed to be that painful.”

“Harry... Did you say something while the potion was working?” asked Sirius.

“Err... no.”

“Do you know what a Nahual is?” enquired Remus.

Harry thought about it for a second, before shaking his head. “No, why?” he asked.

The two men looked at each other, and Harry felt their uncertainty, but he refrained from using his Legilimency on them unasked, like he did for his other friends.

“Have a look at what happened.” Remus proposed, pointing at his own head.

Harry obeyed and found himself back in his own body soon afterwards, looking at them with wide eyes. “I don’t remember any of this.” he said.

“You should find what it is, then.” said Sirius.

Harry nodded, and sat on nearby chair, drinking a cup of tea that Remus had prepared beforehand. They stayed silent and thoughtful for a few minutes, until he spoke again.

“Sirius?”

“Yes?”

“I noticed that you were... quite unfair... toward the Slytherins. I mean, the other Slytherins.” he finished with a smirk. “Why?”

The addressed man kept silent for several seconds before answering. "I guess it's a reminiscence of my time as a student here. I was quite the outcast of my family, you know. All Blacks were sorted in Slytherin and I was quite the black sheep," he smirked, "being sorted in Gryffindor and all. Anyways, I guess my brother and cousins told something to their House, and it started a seven years long war between them and us."

"Us?" asked Harry. "And I didn't know about your family."

"My little brother Regulus was a Slytherin through and through, evil and malevolent, too, but it was the expected behaviour in our family." He frowned suddenly. "Thinking back about it, he might have faked it – he had always been a good actor." He sighed. "Whatever the case, he went particularly well with my cousins Bellatrix and Narcissa. After school, these two cousins married a Death Eater, Bellatrix going with Rodolphus Lestrangle, and Narcissa with Lucius Malfoy."

"Malfoy?"

"Yes. She gave birth to that insufferable brat. The only cousin I like is Andromeda, because she was just forced to follow, at that time. She married a muggle, though, and was disowned for this. Ted Tonks, if I remember correctly."

"Tonks?" asked Harry, referring to the Metamorphmagus Auror.

Remus blushed and Sirius elbowed him before continuing. "Yes, that Tonks is their daughter. She's only six years older than you but, because of an error in the Ministry files, she started school earlier than normal, and her Metamorphmagus powers kept the deception hidden. Speaking of Metamorphmagus, you should meet her someday to compare your powers."

Harry nodded absently, before keeping silent for a few seconds. He had already met her in two occasions but, despite the two men being friends, he wasn't quite ready to show them all his identities. It would cause too much a problem if they reacted abnormally when meeting Jerry around Dumbledore or Snape.

He looked at Sirius. "When you said "us" you meant the Marauders?"

Sirius looked at Remus and they both grinned, although it was a bit sad. "Yes. We started the group in our first year, and kept it tight until... until..."

"Until Voldemort used one of them to kill another." finished Remus. "Peter and James. The traitor and your father."

The three of them stayed silent for several seconds, and Harry spoke first afterwards. "It reminds me... I saw a map, once-"

"You found the map?" asked Sirius, looking up in surprise. "I thought Filch nicked it. It was blank at that time, though. Are you sure it's our map?"

"I don't know if it's your map. You should ask the Weasley twins, since it's in their hands, actually. All I know is that it displays a fairly accurate map of the castle, with people on it." answered Harry, before smirking. "Seeing how Fred and George like pranking people, I guess they are your spiritual heirs."

"True." started Sirius. "I particularly liked last week's one, the Slytherins were drunk, and-"

"I didn't." Harry cut. "I was a target."

"Of course, of course." said Sirius paternally. "Nobody likes being a prank target."

"You don't understand." said Harry. "The prank was to make us feel drunk. It would have been interesting if I hadn't been able to leave the Hall unnoticed before they cast the counter-spell. Have you any idea of what I could have done in that state?" he asked rhetorically, before continuing. "Thankfully, Ginny found me and they stopped the spell before it went too far."

"Ginny?" asked Remus. "Ginny Weasley? The girl with "fiery" hair?"

“Yes. See? I still don’t remember exactly how I did that.”

“It was impressive.” muttered Sirius. “Especially since it hasn’t worn out yet.”

Harry nodded. “So, to sum up, between the twins’ pranks and your unfairness towards them, you can imagine the Slytherins becoming quite bitter and distrustful of Gryffindor in general, and the Headmaster’s lack of reaction in particular. I for one don’t want them going to Voldemort because of that.”

Sirius looked shocked as realization hit, and he nodded slowly. After several thoughtful seconds, he spoke again. “There are a few Slytherins I would encourage the twins to prank endlessly, though.” he said with a smirk. “Malfoy and Snivellus, especially.”

“Who’s Snivellus?” asked Harry.

“That would be Snape.” answered Sirius, ignoring the disapproving glance coming from Remus. “He was the Marauders’ preferred target, and I wouldn’t mind him being taken a few steps down his pedestal. You said I was unfair towards the Slytherins? I know for a fact that he his notoriously unfair towards the other Houses, especially Gryffindor.”

Harry stayed silent for a few seconds, sipping his tea thoughtfully. Even if he wanted Snape to personally suffer a few pranks, he understood him better right now. Even if he had been mean from the start, the man had certainly been pushed further down the road by seven years of pranks from the Gryffindor quartet. No wonder he didn’t like them.

The three of them exchanged a few more pleasantries before Harry left to join his friends outside for the pick-up game of Quidditch. The game had been scheduled through the SAGES earlier, thus involving players from all Houses in both sides. The two Keeper spots being taken, Harry played Beater, and had just enough free time to cast a few discreet glances at the castle. He felt that the game was being

observed and, truth be told, there was a white-bearded man watching them, standing behind his office window. If he had had time to peer at the old man intently, Harry would have noticed that the new spirit of inter-House cooperation brought a happy smile on his wrinkled face.

After the friendly game, the players joined the other students in the Great Hall for lunch, and relaxed in the inter-house common rooms afterwards. 'Dumbledore had sure made a great job.' thought Harry. The old and dusty classroom eleven, unused for years, had been shrunk and converted in an entrance hall with three archways leading out of it. These archways were charmed to prevent noise from entering each room, so as not to disturb each other. On the left, there was the recreation room, where students could play and relax in a joyful atmosphere. There were even a few chess sets and card decks available. On the right was another relaxing room, but it had been separated so that the music players who wanted to congregate there wouldn't disturb or be disturbed by the Exploding Snap players, for instance.

The middle room from "foyer eleven" – and Hermione's favourite – was the room reserved for studying. In that room, thanks to magic, there was also a passageway which led to the Library. Said passage was in fact a magical portal between the studying room and the Library, four floors up. The tables themselves had been enchanted too, so that there would always be a seat available: initially made for four students to sit around, each time someone sat on the last seat, the table was enlarged and another seat appeared. Each table had also a Silence charm built in so that each group could discuss without disturbing the others. As all the tables were near a wall, each of them had a blackboard sticking nearby, which the students found very useful to explain something to a large group of people at the same time.

The last charm concerned the whole room: there was always a table free and, when it was occupied, another one was created, and the room was enlarged accordingly. The charms had been created and tested by Flitwick, and Dumbledore had cast them. Thanks to his Headmaster position, he had been able to tie the castle's energy to the spells, in order to sustain them indefinitely.

The result was a study room where everyone could work peacefully, whatever the need in seats and tables. Should the need arise, the whole school could even congregate around one table, or each of the students could have one table to herself or himself.

It was these facilities that Harry used with Tracey that afternoon. After unwinding by playing a few rounds of Exploding Snap with their friends, the two of them excused themselves. They had had some time to think about the studies made by Tracey's ancestor, and they were ready to write a few articles about it. Using the content of some History books of the Library to back up their words, they wrote a preliminary work and drafted a second before being interrupted.

It was Sunday afternoon, and there were only a few people passing by, but when they saw the History books piled on the table, they left, thinking that the two Slytherin were working on an essay for Binns. Only Hermione was interested enough to enter the Silenced zone. When she understood what they were doing, she decided to help them, and the three of them finished two more papers before dinner.

As the two girls exited to head for the Great Hall, Harry went to his "private bedroom" to change into Jerry Homest. Once done, he Apparated to Diagon Alley.

As autumn had just started, the sun wasn't set yet, and a slanted light was illuminating the top of the buildings. Harry entered the Daily Prophet with his article, and exited the building without it several minutes later, his purse several dozen Galleons heavier. Since it was a preliminary article, intending to provide the ground for the next one, it didn't make it to the front page, but Harry was happy about it nonetheless.

The next Wednesday, in the Potion classroom...

Snape looked at the assembled class, and sneered. "Your essays." he said, and the students scrambled through their schoolbags to hold them out. It had been a difficult subject to write in three rolls of parchment, and most of the students hadn't reached the required length.

Once he had all the parchments in his hands, he threw the stack on his desk and pointed to the board, where a Potion recipe appeared. As usual, the students worked in pair, and Snape had relaxed enough since Harry's last potion mishap to allow them to choose their co-worker. As a result, Harry and Tracey were working together. Harry had warned her that he wasn't going to be very active today, but she had smiled, telling him that an inactive co-worker was always preferable to a sabotaging Crabbe.

While she started the fire under the cauldron, Harry fetched the ingredients and returned to the table to prepare them. After several minutes of quick work, the ingredients were ready, and Harry opened the Potion textbook at the appropriate page, seeming to study today's potion while he was returning to Snape's mind.

Each time he had been there, he had taken great care to remove any traces of a tunnel. After all, the man was a proficient Occlumens, and it wouldn't be good to have his trusted defences breached by the first Legilimens to come around. That's why he needed such a long time to breach through his defences again while staying unnoticed.

When he found himself in the place, he searched for the memory of their last conversation. That took quite a time in the man's mind. When he found it, he followed the strand going to the appropriate memory related to it, and found himself in Dumbledore's office, following a conversation between the two men.

"We have to find him, Severus."

Snape sneered. "Potter? Why?"

Dumbledore looked at his Potion Master with a thoughtful expression. "I know your personal history with the boy's father was a bit... uneven." he said, and Snape snorted. It didn't disturb the old man, though. "The boy, however, is essential for our world. There's a Prophecy about him, you know."

"Yes, I know. And I also know that you refused to tell that one Prophecy to any of us."

“My dear boy...” he said, and Snape bristled at the paternal tone. “You know, perhaps better than me, that there are things that aren’t to be shared with anyone.”

Snape looked down. After several seconds, he spoke again. “I know, Headmaster. Still... Potter!”

“Rest assured that I know what I’m doing. The boy is important for our side, and I can’t allow him to stay out of our control for too long.”

The memory ended there, and a somewhat stunned Harry extracted himself from it. A Prophecy? Dumbledore’s control? Shaking his shock and anger away, he left Snape’s mind, carefully removing traces of his passage. Returning to his own mind, he found an angered Snape looking at him.

‘I’m back.’ he mentally sent to Tracey. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘Crabbe and Goyle made their cauldron explode again. You didn’t move and he noticed it. He asked why you were studying the book instead of the potion on the blackboard. He asked twice.’

Harry winced before returning to his own body. He blinked, and looked at the man innocently. “I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t know that checking with our official books would disturb you. I promise I will behave from now on.”

“Your cheek deserves detention, Mister Anderson.” Snape answered with a barely controlled voice. “With me, this time. You will stay after class and clean the mess. Manually.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you will shut up.”

“Yes, sir.” answered Harry.

“Now!” exclaimed Snape, glaring at him.

The man looked down at Harry, not knowing if the boy was angering him on purpose or not. He had already given him detention, though, and couldn't do more than that. Snape had never taken points from his own House, but the boy was trying his patience, and the Potion Master was close to explosion himself. However, his angry gaze quickly became calculating. If he removed points from the impertinent boy, his Housemates would certainly be angered and avenge themselves.

Snape resumed his tour of the tables, deciding that he would use that card for when the boy would truly annoy him.

When the double period ended, Harry stayed while the other students filed out. Tracey sent him encouraging thoughts and he thanked her without moving a muscle.

When everyone was out, he stood as well and stepped toward Snape.

"What do you want?" asked the man.

"Am I authorized to use a knife to scratch the mess, sir, or should I use my fingernails?"

Snape thought about it for a full second. He was really tempted to tell him to use his fingernails, but it would be visible by anyone, and Pomfrey would have his hide. He stood abruptly, and went to the cabinet where the potion ingredients were stored. The students had to have their own knives and other potion tools, but there were spares, held in drawers there.

Snape took one knife, the most damaged and unsharpened he could find, and gave it to him. "That will do," he said. "Before proceeding, you will put your school bag beside my desk, and your wand on the desk."

Under the man's unblinking eyes, Harry did as he was told before going to the messed place. Fortunately for him, the potion had solidified by now and it wasn't as sticky and unclean as it could have

been. He took the damaged cauldron from the table and started attacking the hardened gunk with the blunt knife, putting the recovered pieces back in the cauldron with a clattering sound.

After half a dozen minutes watching him, Snape went to grading the essays he had just retrieved. He wanted to finish grading the stack before the meal, and was quite sure that the boy's task would last even longer, thus allowing him free reign to annoy him. Repayment, he thought.

Speaking of which...

With a nasty smirk, he skipped to the essay from "Kentaro Anderson", and started etching an angry letter T – for Terrible, not Troll – on it before noticing its length. Surprised, he started reading it, and came to the conclusion that he couldn't give it a T at all. It actually deserved an Exceeds Expectations, at the very least. Besides, knowing the brat, if he gave him a T, he would have to explain how Crabbe and Goyle got an EE although the work was of much lower quality. Snape massaged his neck. Since when his life had started to be so complicated?

He knew the answer to that question, though: it was in the seventies, when he had started following Voldemort around. From there, his whole life had gone down the drain. His girlfriend Bellatrix marrying the Lestrage brothers – yes, plural, he knew what was going on between them. Lucius forcing him to take that vow for Draco's well-being. Dumbledore welcoming him, only to ask him to return to his hell-hole to spy for him. The fall of Voldemort, the prison, the school and the brats. All his problems had reached a peak when Dumbledore had started his mad quest for Potter.

His reverie was interrupted by a loud clank nearby. The boy had put the cauldron on the ground next to him, and was looking at him expectantly. "What are you doing?" snapped Snape.

"I'm finished." Harry simply said, and he moved to the side, revealing the cleaned workspace. Unbeknownst to his daydreaming Potion Master, Harry had used his own tanto to cut and remove the grime more efficiently. It was much sharper and durable than the low-

grade knife he had been handed and, his back to the teacher, Harry had also accelerated his speed in order to work much faster. The result was that he had finished the job quickly, while Snape hadn't even started grading the assignments.

"I said No Magic." said Snape, frowning.

"Can I have my wand back, sir?" asked Harry, pointing to the requested item and denying the man's last assertion at the same time.

"It's not possible." answered Snape. "You must have cheated somehow!" he stated. He tried the wand on his desk, but it was the genuine article. "Accio wand." he said, levelling his own wand on Harry. It was unsuccessful, though, as no other wand came from the boy.

"Sir?" asked Harry. It was asked with the most innocent voice and expression possible but, for Snape, it was a nightmare. The boy was entirely too innocent, and he was sure that, had he not been contemplating his own history, he would have noticed something. Tapping his wand on his desk nervously, he took a decision. After all, he had been there before, so going back wasn't a crime, was it?

"Legilimens."

To his surprise and annoyance, the boy's recent memories were only consisting of manually cleaning the mess caused by Crabbe and Goyle. He left the boy's mind and, without a word, gave him his wand back.

"Thank you, sir." said Harry, grabbing his schoolbag as well before heading out.

The door closed on an empty classroom, and Snape looked down at the essays he still had to mark. A spiteful grin spreading on his face, he finished the letter T on Harry's work. He would always be able to justify it with his usual excuse in this case: he would say that the boy had cheated.

After all, cheating was the goal of their little study group, right? Harry arrived at dinner with enough time to grab a plate of the main course before it switched to the desserts. He quietly explained what had happened to Tracey, and she smiled. The three Chasers were now so finely attuned to each other that, even without having heard him, Wendy and Adrian smiled at the same time Tracey did.

‘Poor Ron.’ thought Harry, thinking of the next game. ‘Quidditch is going to be difficult for the other teams, this year.’

Tracey caught his thought, and her smile widened even more. The two other Chasers repeated the action.

After the meal, the SAGES met in the study room like every evening. This time, however, Hermione left two third year girls lead the group. Katie Bell, one of the Gryffindor Chasers, and Cho Chang, the Asian Ravenclaw, had been included in SAGES since the previous year, and were quite able to lead the studious group in her stead.

Hermione looked at Harry intently before exiting the room towards the Library. ‘Meet me in the Muggles Studies section.’ she thought, and he nodded discreetly.

After five minutes, he excused himself and left through the other exit, before Apparating next to the Library other entrance. He entered and, as inconspicuously as possible, went behind the shelves, heading for the appropriate section. Hermione was there, sitting in one of the few chairs around, and peering over a large tome. Harry took a slimmer book and opened it as well, before going in her head.

‘Hi.’ he mentally said, as if they were just meeting.

Her conscious self smiled. ‘Alright, let’s keep civil, shall we? It’s not like I asked you to come here.’

‘What did you want?’ he asked.

‘I found several things you asked me.’

‘And...?’

‘Haven’t you read my mind already? You seem to be quite an inefficient mind reader, Mister Potter.’ she said, her mental words underlined with laughter.

‘Come on, you know I could. All it would take is for me to leave your consciousness building and harvest your memories.’ He smirked. ‘I would then know all your secrets, especially why you kept blushing with your Ravenclaw friends on the train rides, last year.’

‘You wouldn’t!’ she exclaimed, and her eyes went wide with fear.

Despite his words having been said only to put her on edge, he hadn’t envisioned a reaction of fear. ‘I wouldn’t, but you have made me curious, and my unconscious could fetch the memory without me knowing, if you don’t appease it.’

She blushed again and mumbled something Harry didn’t catch.

‘What was that?’

‘I said that it was girl’s talk. You shouldn’t be interested in this.’

‘Come on, it mustn’t be that-’

‘Yes it is!’ she exclaimed. ‘We were talking about girls’ problems. You understand, now?’

‘Err... I’m sorry, but... no?’

She huffed. ‘God! This is so embarrassing!’ After several seconds gathering her will, she spoke again. ‘We were speaking about periods.’

‘Periods?’ he asked, wondering. Suddenly, a few memories taken here and there clinched, and he blushed a beet red himself. ‘Oh! Periods!’

‘Yes!’ she exclaimed, relieved that she didn’t have to explain the subject anymore. ‘Finished being nosy?’

‘Alright, alright. Sorry.’ he mumbled.

Hermione needed a few more seconds to return to her normal self. ‘If I asked for you to come here, it’s because I found something about the Fidelius, and something else about the Magical Maturity.’

‘Really? What is it?’

She didn’t answer and seemed to concentrate. ‘Come out and get it.’ she then said. ‘I’ll talk about it later.’

Harry exited the white building and found himself in Hermione’s ordered mind. Noticing the two memory blocks hovering next to him, he copied them to his mind, and took a minute to browse them before returning to chat with Hermione.

‘Wow.’ he said. ‘Thanks. It must have taken most of your time.’

She shrugged, but he felt a feeling of pride emanating from her. ‘It was nothing.’ she said. ‘It took a long time, in fact, because I only worked on this in my free time, and I wanted to double-check my information.’

‘Thanks you all the same. It’s impressive. I will have to work on it, but I think that your work had removed every ambiguous bits.’ he said, before remembering the second block. ‘For the Magical Maturity, are you...’ he trailed off.

‘Am I sure as well?’ she asked. ‘Quite, yes. Sorry, Harry. You have to read everything, though.’

Harry kept silent. It was quite a shock. Hermione had unearthed a study on the very subject of Magical Maturity, and it showed several things. First, there were two different steps to take into account when one was speaking about Magical Maturities, even if both generally

happened at roughly the same time. The first was the ability to control one's magic, and the second was the stabilization or, simply put, the end of accidental magic events – also known as wish-like magic.

One of the findings outlined in the study concerned the magical prowess of the people studied: the further the control was before from the stabilization, the more skilled the wizard or witch was – especially if they trained during their younger years.

The second point was relative to the life expectancy of these wizards and witches: with the same condition, their life expectancy was reduced as well!

The study showed that people having obtained their control at 9 years old and the stabilization at the regular age of 11 were living a mere 80 years – a young age for dying, in the magical community. Using the study's formulas, Harry tried to compute his own life expectancy. He knew he had started controlling his magic early in his life and, placing the start of that control at 5 years old, he found a dying age of 30. And if he narrowed his starting age to 4 years, which was closer to the truth, he obtained 15!

He was so shocked that the book he had been holding fell from his grasp and hit his foot painfully.

He didn't care, though, and his mind was churning around the fresh memory. He found a few facts that gave him hope, though. First of all, the study had been made by wizards, without the exhaustiveness of the studies Muggles were accustomed to, and only a group made of nine wizards and five witches had been tested, half of them still alive during the study. The second fact was outlined in the study itself: the study didn't take into account the amount of magical power of said persons. In fact, it clearly stated that people like Albus Dumbledore, who was reported to have a 3-year gap between control and stabilization, had been removed from the test group due to their inadequacy with the formula.

"Remembering" that, Harry snorted. What kind of study could be taken seriously if the test groups were chosen following the proposed formula? He then understood Hermione's last sentence. Of course,

the study results were ominous, but they couldn't be taken really seriously. Still, Hermione's memory confirmed that it was the only published study speaking about the two steps of Magical Maturity.

The last point which helped him deal with the news was that his own advanced control could be partly attributed to Voldemort: when the Dark Lord had hit him in the head, that fateful night of Halloween 1981, he had transferred a part of his mind, and it could have helped him to control his magic earlier.

Harry returned to his body and grabbed the fallen book – it was a book about muggle politics, but, actually, he hadn't taken it to read it anyway – and stored it where he had taken it before grabbing another one and returning to Hermione's mind.

‘Are you alright?’ she asked worriedly.

He smiled. ‘Yes, thank you. Despite the scare, it was informative.’

She nodded, and the two of them spoke several more minutes about the memories before ending their silent conversation. They then put the unread books where they belonged and left the Library the same way they had entered it. Harry Apparated from the fourth floor corridor to his bed, and Hermione used the 4-stair shortcut offered by the new common rooms to head to the Ravenclaw dorms. Saturday, ten days later...

Remus looked at Sirius with a happy smile. The two of them had spent the three nights of the full moon in the Shrieking Shack, but both had kept their human shape for the whole duration. Since they didn't have much to do, they had taken advantage of their time there to straighten the house a bit. Several years of werewolf rage had broken more than a few pieces of furniture. Speaking of which, the two friends made a good use of Transfiguration and Enlargement charms to refurnish and bring an air of liveliness to the ramshackle house.

While they were doing so, Dumbledore was reading a sheet of crisp and official parchment from Gringotts. In his search for Harry Potter, he hadn't thought of the boy's financial status until a few days ago.

He had then sent a polite request to the goblins and he was now reading their answer. For the third time.

Dear Headmaster,

We are sorry to inform you that your request for obtaining the state of the Potter family vault is unanswerable due to the simple fact that you don't belong to that family. The answer to your other question is zero. There is simply nothing in Mister Potter's trust vault.

Knapsack
Account Management
Gringotts

The old man sighed. Was he to understand that Harry had taken possession of his funds already? How? When? He extracted the key to Harry's vault from one of his drawers and sighed again. He knew the Goblins, and if Harry had come to them with a legal request and a lump of money to back it up, they would do it. For him to get more information about Harry's finances would be illegal, though, and no amount of coercion would make the Goblins compliant.

That evening, in the quiet and almost deserted study room, Harry was working with Tracey and Hermione on the soon-to-be-published articles, like the previous fortnight. Their work finished, Harry stored a copy of their second work – much thicker than the first – in his schoolbag before heading to his dorm. Once again, he Apparated out from there, and headed to the Daily Prophet Headquarters as Jerry Homest. And, once again, he left the article against a few more Galleons.

The next morning, the wizarding newspaper arrived as usual and some people read it immediately while others put it aside. However, the second category fished the paper out quickly when they noticed the shocked expressions of the people in the first category. The students in Slytherin looked especially incensed by a particular article.

Blood Ties Us All
by Jerry Homest

As outlined in last fortnight's article from this very reporter, there had been few in-depth studies made on blood ties between wizarding families, and the ones made never got published. This reporter is proud to have unearthed one such study, relying heavily on complete family trees of influential families. "Complete" here means that unborn babies are going to be displayed, as well as squibs' descent. Even more shocking, several descendants of these poor squibs have had their magical blood strengthened somewhat and new wizards and witches have been born down the line. An upcoming article will give probable explanations about why this happens, as well as choices to make for the future of the wizarding world. Today, we will only review the complete family trees of several well-known families.

And the families listed there were the Blacks, the Malfoys, and the Prince, each of them going back several centuries. In each of them, one could see the rate of unborn children and squibs going up with each generation. These squibs' descendants, instead of being hidden like in the wizarding world's official family trees, were shown as well, and several so-called muggleborns had the surprise of finding their name there. Draco Malfoy uttered a cry of rage and burned his copy of the Daily Prophet before stomping out of the Great Hall, his goons hurrying behind him with arms laden with scones.

After all, the paragon of pureblood bigotry had just found himself half a dozen so-called "muggleborn" cousins in the current student population, and it wasn't something he was ready to accept. Said cousins weren't either.

As he was exiting the Great Hall after breakfast, Harry heard a mental question from Hermione. It was something his friends had discovered a long time ago: even if they weren't natural Legilimens themselves, they could send thoughts towards Harry, and his own Legilimency would pick them up.

‘Can we discuss in the study room?’ she asked.

He sent a mental nod and headed there. When they found themselves seating at one of the Silenced table, she spoke first.

“I have had an idea for Genevieve.” she said.

“What is it?”

“Well... I thought that, instead of building the neutrino detector on the roof, she could have an experimental one in her office, and she would only need someone to cast a tube-shaped anti-Apparation field with a valve-shaped base to recuperate the trapped neutrinos. From there, a tube would go to...” she trailed off, before frowning.

“Yes? What is it?” asked Harry.

“Come get the memory.” she said. “It will be quicker than an explanation, and you’ll have the question with it.”

He did, and frowned as well, before smiling. “You want me to go there to do it?”

“Only if you agree.”

“No problem, really.”

“Great!” she exclaimed, smiling. “I have a half-finished letter I want to send her soon and, since you agree, I’ll add a few words to it. I’ll ask her the most appropriate moment for you to go there, too.”

“Yes. You do that.” he said.

She didn’t have anything else to ask, and they left the room to see Ron trouncing Seamus at chess – once again.
24 hours later, in the United States of America...

The Monday afternoon sun was heating the west windows of the large building. It was 4pm in McLean, Virginia, and the work day of the CIA employees was drawing to an end. Well... not all employees. Agent Carla Mohavez had returned empty-handed from Switzerland, and, since then, she had tried to find her elusive target through the computers, without much success. Where in the world was Harry Calder Dursley?

And then, a colleague had said something off the top of his hat, and she had lunged on the new track, cursing her lack of insight.

“Seems like a double-barrelled name to me.” Gerhard had said.

She had looked at him with distrust. Despite needing her firearm on her job, she didn't like seeing kids shoot or being shot in the streets or anywhere else. Conversely, he was affiliated to the NRA, and proud enough to display it on anything he could, his clothes, his mug, his desk, everywhere. She was sure that it had something to do with the double-barrelled shotguns he was acquainted to, but he had explained her that some people liked to give both the father and mother names to a baby. Calder could very well be a surname instead of a middle name, then, and she started a search for this name on every available file.

Working at the CIA, she had access to many files, including the passenger lists of national airports. She couldn't get the Swiss bank payrolls, unfortunately. She found a Calder family having moved to Tokyo three months earlier, with a single trip ticket. There was no "Harry" Calder at all, and she wasn't even sure that it was the family she was searching for. However, crossing her information with Geneva public registers proved that the same family still owned a large house near the lake, not far from the one that had been painted with flowers.

This time around, though, she didn't want to make a useless trip – she knew she'd been fired if she did – and, after writing everything down, she explored the other Calder individuals and families there.

She was convinced, though, that her first trail was the correct one.

Four days later, she had exhausted the life of the 37 other persons with the surname Calder in Geneva, and none matched her criteria. She succeeded in getting an authorization for an accompanied trip in Switzerland and landed near Geneva as the Saturday morning sun was barely rising. Once there, she went to the lakeside house directly and recognized it immediately. She also remembered briefly

interviewing the lone scientist living in it, and mentally kicked herself again.

She rang, but no one answered. It was still early in the morning, and the young woman was perhaps working already, or out at the mall. After knocking at the door unsuccessful as well, she used one of her useful gadgets to unlock the door and entered the lounge. Motioning her two bodyguards to search the rest of the house, she sat down and looked around.

The house was well-ordered and well-furnished. Thinking about it made her frown. 'Since when do scientists earn that much money to themselves?' she thought. The woman's profile had shown a promising talent, but she would never gain enough to buy this house by herself. She didn't have any impressive inheritance either, which meant that the Calders must let her live in it. And it also meant that she must know them somehow. Agent Mohavez rubbed her hands in anticipation.

It was a long-lived anticipation, though, because Genevieve didn't go home before the darkening hours of the evening. After all, not living with anyone, the young scientist could come home at any hour. Even on Saturdays. In fact, Agent Mohavez was lucky not to have to wait another 24 hours, because Genevieve was sometime sleeping on a bunk bed in her office, so as to be even closer to her work.

After the customary unpleasant surprise of seeing someone at home, Genevieve was brought to a seat in front of agent Mohavez. She noticed the open bags of chips from the pantry and smiled at the trespassers' long stay. It was a brief and internal smile, though. If they had waited that long, it meant that they had serious business to discuss.

"Where's Harry?" the woman in front of her suddenly asked.

Genevieve looked at her, her eyes wide. "What do you mean? I know several people with that forename... Harry who?"

Agent Mohavez nodded to the men, and one of them slapped Genevieve. The sharp sound resounded in the large room, quickly followed by the clatter of the scientist's glasses on the floorboards.

"Where's Harry?" the woman asked again.

Genevieve was a scientist, not a secret agent or anyone else trained to withstand violence. Each time she answered something the other woman wasn't expecting, or each time she didn't know the answer to a question, she was slapped again. The promise of more violent torture made her blabber everything she knew about Harry – which wasn't much, though. At one point, she didn't know if her lack of knowledge was fortunate or not. It sure was painful. On top of that, they looked at her with wide eyes when she started to speak about the accident in the LEP or the neutrinos traps. Either they believed that she was crazy to believe in magic, or they didn't understand the scientific concepts behind her words. Either way, she was slapped again, and soon fell unconscious.

Mohavez looked at the prone body thoughtfully. She was a field agent and had learnt to discern truth and lies in a person's talk, and what Genevieve had said had been coined with belief. She had now another trail, though, leading to England. As it was less precise than the one to Tokyo, she decided to head to Japan first. Taking a syringe and a small bottle from her pocket, she prepared a calming shot and injected it expertly.

The two gorillas holding Genevieve upright, they left the house and hailed a nearby cab.

"Oh my!" said the cab driver jovially. "You guys know how to party!"

"Yeah, yeah." answered Mohavez absently, removing her leather vest before sitting on the front seat. "To the airport."

"On my way, Mistress." answered the smiling man.

Five minutes later, the cab pulled up on the loading/unloading curb and the driver turned around. He didn't have time to ask for money,

though, because Agent Mohavez dropped a 20-franc note in his hand and exited the car with the bodyguards. As they were going into a crowded place, she wanted to direct her bodyguard in order to take care of Genevieve's unconscious body and left her heavy vest on the seat for a few seconds. The three of them turned toward Genevieve's prone form, intending to take her out.

It didn't happen.

The taxi started suddenly and jumped forward, its wheel screaming on the asphalt and its doors slamming shut in the process. The three agents went for their guns, but the car was already far when they could take proper aim. On top of that, policemen nearby saw the firearms, and led Agent Mohavez and her bodyguards in the airport prison. Mohavez yelled, swore, and cursed, but it didn't change anything: they had been caught with firearms and without any identification papers – the cab having left with her vest inside, and the bodyguards being nameless field agents. Still upset about the loss of her vest, she thought the cab had just robbed her and didn't realize immediately that she had been double crossed.

Their case not being urgent, they had to wait the maximum legal delay for the policemen to finally verify their identity and job. The two bodyguards were then heavily fined and their weapons confiscated: guns with a silencing mechanism and overly large calibres weren't allowed anywhere in Switzerland, even held by secret services agents.

The three spies had then to recover proper identification from the United States of America embassy, and it was in a very annoyed mood that Agent Carla Mohavez booked three seats on the first plane to Tokyo, that Tuesday afternoon.

A couple of days earlier...

Even if, around the Arctic Circle, the sun hadn't really set for almost six months by now, it was early morning that Sunday in western Russia. The last few tourists of the season passed through the Paanajärvi National Park, admiring the lake Pyaozero without noticing the castle standing on the mountains nearby.

The castle was called Durmstrang Institute for Magic – or plainly "Durmstrang" for the people in the know – and was housing the students and staff. Said students and staff were having a cold breakfast – as usual – when the Headmaster suddenly felt a certain magical item activate in his pocket. Without an explanation, Igor Karkaroff left the Dining Hall of the Institute and Apparated to Moscow, in the pub his contact had designated as emergency meeting point. Exiting the pub's toilets, he found the man waiting for him.

After the customary coded sentences and Silencing spell, he addressed the General quite haughtily.

"What is it?"

Karkaroff didn't like muggles that much, and preferred not having to deal with them because of an eventual acceptance of muggleborns in his institute. That explained why he was rather annoyed at having been effectively summoned by a muggle – even though it was himself who had given the charmed item to the man. He was going to adjust his line of thought in a few seconds, though.

"We found something concerning your quarry." answered the General. "Calder wasn't a middle name, but a family name. Our enemy has already cleared the quarry's Swiss base but we succeeded in nicking their hostage, trapping them at the same time."

"Hostage?"

"A young woman. Interesting pedigree if you search for a particle physicist, but I don't see what role she plays in the big picture."

Karkaroff shrugged noncommittally. He didn't see either, but he never admitted ignorance to a muggle. "Are you willing to pass her to our care?"

"It depends on what you offer."

Karkaroff smirked. He knew the man's few weak points and could play on it. "Two beautiful ones. And they are as pure as one could be."

"Age?"

"Eight years, but they are already quite a handful."

"In my basement?"

"As usual."

"When?"

"Tomorrow."

The General licked his lips in anticipation. "Oak?" he asked.

"Of course."

They shook hands to seal the deal. Few people could get the General two oak casks of pure malt Islay Whisky and put it in his basement unnoticed.

"Where is the woman?" asked Karkaroff.

"Our office in Brno. You know where it is?"

The wizard drew his wand discreetly. No one was holding the position of Durmstrang Headmaster without being a bit proficient in the mind arts. "Legilimens." he whispered.

After a few seconds, he nodded. "I know where it is. They are warned that my men are arriving, aren't they?"

"Yes."

“And I would like a list of all the Calders in Geneva, with age, family, and occupation.”

The General nodded, and gave him a sheet of paper from his pocket.

Karkaroff was impressed, but it didn't let it show. The General was resourceful and had envisioned the fact that he could have asked that very list. That made Karkaroff reflect for a bit.

“Do you have anything else for me?” he asked suddenly.

The other man shook his head. “Niet. This is all we have for the moment.”

As they had nothing more to tell each other, they parted ways quite quickly, and Karkaroff Apparated from the restroom to the Czech town. He found the house quite easily, and was given the woman without needing to give an explanation.

Going into a nearby alley, the man concentrated. He was already tired by the long-distance Apparation jumps and, taking the woman with him, it would drain him even more. He knew that, but there was no faster mean to reach his destination.

With a loud pop, Karkaroff and his shipment disappeared from the dark alleyway.

To be continued in next chapter: Hidden Skirmishes...

Ding ding, little children sing,
Ding ding, the foreign spies ring,
The door opened on mayhem,
And Harry'll have to get them.

Chapter 20 – Hidden Skirmishes

posted October 29th, 2005

On Saturday, October 17th, while Agent Mohavez was waiting for Genevieve to show up in her house, Harry was delivering the last blow of his trilogy against the pureblood bigotry. Knowing that his timing had to be good, he went to post the third article in the last minutes before the Daily Prophet headquarters' closing hour.

In the last weeks, the journal had seen a sudden increase in sales, and Harry's articles about blood had been the catalyst to that raise. Richman happily gave him a large bag of Galleons for his third article, even though he knew that it was a dangerous business. The journal had already received several annoyed and angry letters from the families listed in the previous article and other pureblood ones. However, knowing that it would sell even better, the manager firmly wanted to include several of these letters in the next Sunday edition, right next to Harry's third article. Said article, exposing the theory of Mathilda Prince in-depth, was going to shake the ground under several people's feet, Richman thought, and it was perfect for his journal to be in the centre of things.

Unfortunately for Harry, the manager's mind wasn't very protected, and had been breached by a few people in the previous days. As "Jerry" was leaving the newspaper headquarters, the seriousness of the situation hit him in the face. Almost literally. "Almost" only because he had sensed the attack and had crouched suddenly, letting the spell fly harmlessly over his head.

The sun was setting and the alley was empty, bar the three wizards targeting him. The three men were clad in expensive-looking dark cloaks with their hoods up, hiding their face. They weren't wearing masks and the cloaks weren't black, though, only a dull brown or blue – they weren't even the same colour. Since it wasn't the usual garb of Death Eaters, Harry remembered about Richman's warnings about the threatening letters, and supposed that the three attackers were just idle purebloods annoyed by his articles.

He didn't want to cause trouble, and simply disappeared. He couldn't leave the premises, though, as the gaseous reality was solidified, the

telltale stillness of an anti-Apparation field surrounding him. His departure surprised his attackers, though, and they seemed at a loss at what to do. When Aurors walked around the corner, attracted by the commotion, the tallest attacker did something with his wand. The anti-Apparation field disappeared and the three wizards vanished as well.

Harry decided to follow the three men – he was quite sure these were men – through the gaseous reality, and arrived next to a house surrounded by a strange construct. It wasn't hard like a classical anti-Apparation field, and it trembled slightly. It was... wobbly.

Harry pressed with his fingers on the thing, but it solidified under his touch, only to become wobbly again when he removed his finger. Since his three preys had lunged through it, he suspected that it was some kind of anti-Apparation ward keyed to something. Something he didn't have, obviously.

Several minutes later, back in Kentaro's shape and back in Hogwarts, he found Hermione playing a late game chess with Ginny. After greeting both of them, he mentally asked the Ravenclaw if she knew about the wobbly field he had encountered and if his supposition about a keyed ward was sound. Still in silence, she pushed a whole memory block about anti-Apparation fields toward him and he imported it, staggering under its size. He then excused himself and went to the nearest bathroom to swallow a couple aspirin tablets with water. Going to his bed afterwards, he reflected about his mind. He had many many things there and, even if it was well-ordered, it took more and more time to properly absorb new information. Just before sleep took him, he mentally vowed to find a way to treat the problem before he found his mind completely full.

The next day, in a magicked study room...

Harry was with Tracey and Hermione in the deserted study room again, discussing of the impact their last article had had on the student population. It had been tremendous, and the purebloods had all burnt their copies of the newspaper, some of them revoking their subscription right then. The half-blood and muggleborn students,

though, had been ecstatic about it. Basically, Harry and his friends had explained the meticulous study Tracey's ancestor had done.

Magical ability was a genetic thing, transmitted from parents to children. The problem was when someone had too much of it in the blood, it sort of clogged itself. That sort of gene jamming occurs in the animal world as well: when one crosses a tiger and a lioness, the resulting animal doesn't grow more than cub's size – whereas a lion and tigress' offspring grows much larger than his parents.

To restore the proper genetic background of a magical person, some "fresh blood" had to be imported, in the form of marrying a muggle at some point. It wasn't a requirement, of course, but Mathilda Werner's study showed that, if five generation of "purebloods" led to a particular newborn, the likelihood for that newborn to be a Squib was of one in 80. Taken to six generations, said probability raised to one in 60, and it continued to rise with the same ratio for each subsequent generation of purely magical ancestors. With some families' current lineages, going back 20 generations, the odds for a "suitable" heir had reverted to one in 15 – one couple had to try to conceive 15 babies to have a chance at having a magical one; and what they did with the 14 others wasn't something discussed in polite society.

Needless to say, it had been an uproar. But, contrarily to some other studies made about magical people, Harry was sure that this one was believable: Tracey's ancestor had spent decades exploring the family trees of witches and wizards.

After several minutes discussing about it, the three friends branched to other topics of discussion. Hermione talked with Harry about the neutrino traps, for instance, and both of them wondered why Genevieve hadn't answered her yet. Just at they were switching to a Quidditch-related discussion, Cassie called Harry suddenly.

By now, Harry was used to the Hogwarts' consciousness butting in his thought processes. It was generally unobtrusive enough to allow him to function normally. However, this time around, Cassie was quite intrigued. A man she knew as being Igor Karkaroff was bringing a muggle woman in the castle through the Headmaster office's fireplace. A muggle!

“Don’t wait for me.” he told the two girls, before checking his surrounding once more and disappearing. He changed into Jerry Homest on his way to the Headmaster’s office.

There, he saw the shapes of Dumbledore and Snape, as well as a third man – Karkaroff, certainly – looking over the woman Cassie had warned him about. As he couldn’t discern facial features in the gaseous reality, he asked Cassie to send him a live feed of what was happening there, and he gasped when he received it.

He knew the unconscious woman!

Seeing Genevieve’s battered state, he started to get angry but quickly learnt that it wasn’t because of the Russian wizard. Keeping his temper in check, he focused on her mind and entered it easily. He had the surprise, however, to see three people there already, floating between memories and discussing as if it was an everyday thing. ‘Guess they don’t have second thoughts when chatting in someone’s mind uninvited.’ Harry reflected.

Harry knew about the woman’s mind. She had been the first of benefiting from the mind changes he had brought on the Weasley twins and the last two Marauders. Everything concerning Harry or the other members of his family in Japan was buried under her consciousness building. In fact, by just looking around her mind, no one could find any link between her and Harry or the others. For all snooping Legilimens, she was an "ordinary" muggle scientist.

She had been in control of her mind while being roughly manhandled, though, and had blabbed to Agent Mohavez about the wizarding world and the Dursleys being in Japan. Shuddering, Harry removed that only memory before reflecting about what he should do. How could he take her from the Headmaster’s office unnoticed?

How could he...

Hidden behind a set of memories, he looked at the three men chatting and came to a conclusion. If their consciousnesses were

here, they weren't elsewhere, and he smiled before extracting himself from the unconscious mind.

He then Apparated in, as silently as he could, and grabbed Genevieve's body, before disappearing again. Looking at the three men's postures from the gaseous reality, Harry realized that they hadn't found about it yet. Not knowing what the reaction would be, but firmly intending to find out later, he headed to Switzerland with Genevieve in his arms.

In the woman's mind, the three wizards looked at themselves worriedly. They had been chatting amiably while inspecting the woman's memories. Due to the impressive quantity of information, they had deemed that being three to inspect them wasn't going to be superfluous. Snape had been annoyed to no point, of course, and had been continually swearing under his breath at muggle scientists.

Strangely, the three of them felt a gradual loss of perception. It wasn't much, at first, but they soon realized that they were seeing less and less clearly, and that each action they took was slower and slower, bordering on the excruciating.

The first to leave was Karkaroff, closely followed by Snape – who had been proud enough not to leave first. Dumbledore followed several seconds later, and the three of them shared a common realization: the woman had disappeared. Dumbledore tried to ask the castle about it, but it didn't yield any result, and the portraits weren't informative either, having slept all along.

“What does that mean?” asked a worried Karkaroff.

“That, my dear Igor,” started Dumbledore, his eyes twinkling despite his tired appearance, “is a sign that the woman was more than what met the eye. Have you got her identity?”

The two other wizards glanced at each other before looking back at the Headmaster, shaking their heads. “I got her address, though.” the Potion Master stated. “It's a miracle, though. I swear I never met a muggle with such a full mind.”

Karkaroff nodded along. "Absolutely. I didn't even understand what it was about."

"Useless memories, if you ask me." Snape said. "I would have removed them all, if we weren't on a quest for memories, there."

Dumbledore sat back. He had understood a bit of the memories, but it was confusing at best, and he couldn't even start to explain to the two men. He sighed and looked at his Potion Master. "Where is it?"

"Switzerland." answered Snape with a pointed look.

"Of course. Switzerland." Dumbledore repeated. "Same as last time?"

"Strangely enough, no. But it could explain why there was nobody there."

Karkaroff looked at the two other wizards. "What are you on about?"

"We went to Switzerland already, in search for Potter." said Snape, the last word being drawled as though he was unpleasant to pronounce it.

In the following silence, Dumbledore wrote a short message to the Deputy Headmistress to warn her about his and Snape's absences, and sent it with Fawkes.

The old man then stood up, and handed the Floo powder pot to them. "Ready for an international trip, gentlemen?" he asked, and Snape snorted.

Switzerland, at the same time...

Harry had arrived in his Swiss home and, after laying Genevieve on the sofa, he considered his options. The woman was in bad shape, but in no immediate danger. On top of that, he knew her address wasn't belonging to her set of well-kept secrets, and he suspected he would see wizards around soon.

He only had few courses of action. The first was to abandon the house, but he didn't like it. The second was to fight, but it would be dangerous for all the persons involved. The third...

He smiled.

Some time ago, Hermione had given him a memory block containing her research on the Fidelius Charm and how to cast it. Since then, he had started practising with it, hiding small parts of Hogwarts for short periods of time. It had been particularly fun to see a group of Slytherins walk in circles in their common room, searching for an invisible exit.

He knew that, for the spell to work, the thing to be hidden had to be encased in a perfect rectangular volume of which each corner had to be designated with a specific incantation. Fortunately, his Apparation skill and newly-discovered flying ability allowed him to go to the upper corners quickly and easily. He then remembered the whole Architecture package he had grabbed from Alison's friend Abigail, back in Japan. One of the included Excavation spells was going to help him to dig from the basement outwards, in order to reach the four lower corners. He could have done with a cube not including the basement, but he preferred to be thorough.

Just as he was Apparating in the exact middle of the property, ready to finalize the incantation, he sensed three wizards approaching on the road nearby. Finishing the spell with a smirk, he felt the now-familiar wave of magic radiating from him to the designated volume's corners and back. That particular spell made secret the volume delimited during its incantation, with the caster the only one to know. Designating another Secret Keeper to replace the caster was another bit of spellwork, but Harry was plainly satisfied to be the one to keep that particular secret.

The three wizards stopped walking suddenly, and Harry's smirk expanded into a full blown grin, knowing that he had fooled them. He then returned to Genevieve, intending to heal her to the best of his abilities.

Down the road, Snape stopped first, making Karkaroff walk into his backside.

“Watch it!” the Potion Master hissed, before scratching his neck. Despite the powerful illusions they could have cast to hide themselves, Dumbledore had deemed essential that they transfigure part of their clothes into muggle garb, and the vest’s turtleneck was itching.

Their main problem, though, was before their eyes. Or rather, had been before their eyes, before disappearing in a ripple, the two adjoining houses seeming to jump to occupy the place.

Dumbledore knew the spell enough to determine what had happened. “Somebody has just cast the Fidelius charm on the house.” he stated grimly. “Unless they walk out of it and into the street now, we won’t be able to find anything about it.”

He stayed silent for several thoughtful seconds before shaking his head. “Given how they react to us, I’m sure they will Apparate rather than walk away, though.”

The three of them reflected about it, before grudgingly admitting their defeat and parting ways. Snape and Dumbledore were going back to Hogwarts, and Karkaroff said he was awaited at Durmstrang. However, instead of returning to Russia directly, Karkaroff wanted to test another trail, and extracted the list of Calders from his pocket. He motioned for a nearby taxi and began a quest to check the 37 names on it.

After all, he was buying his safety from Dumbledore, and he knew the older man required a high price.

A short time later, Harry had finished healing Genevieve’s bruises, and he was waking her up.

“Ungh... did you get that Oh-My-God particle’s plate number?” she asked absently, rubbing her head.

Harry looked at her with wide eyes before shaking his head in wonder. Having noticed her glasses on the lounge floor while casting the Fidelius, he fetched them and explained his findings about her state, before telling her about the new protection around the house – giving her the address at the same moment. At his suggestion, she agreed to keep a low profile by staying at home for a few days. She nodded, and assured him she didn't need anything: the fridge was almost full, and she also had the possibility to connect her computer to the CERN using the phone lines and her top-of-the-range 57600bps modem. It wasn't the ideal setting, but it would keep her in contact with her lab and colleagues.

Harry went to see Mustafa right afterwards, and found him peacefully sitting on his terrace with his wife.

“You there already?” the man asked just after the greetings.

“Why so?”

“I just sent your bird, Quicksilver.” Mustafa answered. “I saw something on the Turkish news and I wanted to share it with you, so I phoned Vernon for him to send the bird over.”

“I'm in transit. I didn't get the message.” Harry admitted. “What was it about?”

“When I was much younger, I worked as an assistant farmer for a man named Tevfik Esenç. The news was about his death.”

“Why would he be talked about in the news?” wondered Harry. “I mean... unless...”

“There's something about him that was unique. In the news, they said he was the last fluent speaker of an old language.” Mustafa stated before smirking – a strange sight on his wrinkled face. “That's what they think, anyway. They made a fuss at the television, speaking about the death of a language, and other nonsense. The Ubykh language isn't dead!” he finished vehemently.

“How do you know?” asked Harry, even if he had an idea about the reason.

Mustafa looked at him intently. “The man taught me.” he said in a strange language that Harry understood anyways. “And it looks like you can speak it too.”

With an awkwardness due to the strange phonemes used, Harry tried to answer in the same language. “Looks like it, yes.”

“Great!” Mustafa exclaimed in English. “When you told me that you “imported” language blocks, I wasn’t sure you had recuperated this one as well.”

“Sorry if I did.” Harry replied. “At that time, my control was crude and I imported whole language blocks in one go – needed a couple aspirins each time.”

The man raised his hands. “No need to apologize. In fact, I’m happy you have it. I would have given it to you anyways. That way, the language still lives, you know?”

Harry nodded, and the two of them sipped their tea quietly.

As Mustafa was the first to finish, he told Harry about several other things he had seen on the newscasts. Apparently, the man had acquired a liking in the television and he was now knowledgeable on many topics. From the life and death of Nobel Peace Prize recipient Willy Brandt to the meteorite that had crashed in the Chevrolet of an American family, he could talk for hours. After a few minutes, though, Harry interrupted Mustafa’s tale of a Russian serial killer’s trial and told him the real reason behind his visit: to give Genevieve’s address to the two of them.

The man was surprised, but Harry told him that it was necessary because of a protection spell he had just cast over the large house. Now that they had been notified by him, they would be able to see the house. They won’t be able to tell others, though, as it was part of the

protection system. During the discussion, he had the surprise of seeing – and feeling – his Peregrine Falcon land on his shoulder.

“Where were you, master?” the bird asked indignantly. “I travelled back and forth for a moment, there.”

Harry smiled. “I was in transit, Quicksilver. Thank you for the message, though.” he said, taking the proffered message and pocketing it.

“Are you going to keep me now?”

“I’m sorry. You know I can’t, right now.” answered Harry. “However, I can bring you back home. Would you like that?”

“I’d like to, master.”

Harry thanked Fatima for the tea and Mustafa for the information, before Apparating out. Half an hour later, he reappeared in his family apartment in Tokyo and was greeted by a war-like scenery.

Apparently, his cousins had been playing with Lego again, and there were colourful little blocks everywhere in the lounge. At the same time, a computer was open on the low table and another one was on the floor, directing a robot. They all stopped playing – and repairing a computer, in Jorg’s case – when they noticed him. He found himself receiving three enthusiastic children in a hug, and toppled backwards, his falcon leaving his shoulder with an indignant screech. After painfully landing on several more blocks, Harry sat and greeted the younger kids more formally.

Vernon and Petunia joined them, and they discussed about school and other everyday things for a few minutes, until the man asked him the real question.

“Why are you here?”

Harry looked at them, explaining that there were people on their trail again, and that he had mastered an interesting spell to hide locations.

When he asked if they agreed that he cast it on their flat, they nodded, and he did so. He then retold them the apartment's address, as well as their Swiss home's.

James then asked if he could disguise them as well and he shook his head. He wasn't that much proficient in long-lasting illusions and organic transfiguration wasn't his forte. On top of that, it could cause problems for them to go to work with changed features. However, he remembered some of the things he had done while "inebriated", Ginny's hair in particular, and told them that he could modify their hair. They readily agreed with the idea and gave several suggestions for each other's hair.

A few minutes later, Vernon got his white hair removed and Petunia got the blond hair she had never been able to obtain through muggle hair dye. James' hair was lightened to resemble his mother's, while the girls' was darkened, smoothed, and elongated. Harry joked about it, but it was perfect since, with braids, they would look like every other Japanese schoolgirl, minus the eyes.

Lastly, he gave them the mental picture of agent Mohavez, so that they could warn him if she showed up. Not wanting to be missed in school, he then hugged his family and left for Hogwarts, promising to come back later. After all, with only an hour needed for the whole trip, he could come every Sunday when he didn't have anything else to do.

Remembering Genevieve on the way, he made a quick stop at her house and offered to change her hair too. She accepted and, following her indications, he lengthened and smoothed it, before changing its usual brown colour into black. She nodded at the work and said that she could always use coloured contact lenses to hide her eyes, as she already had a prescription. Harry found that it was an interesting idea and promised himself to tell his family about it next Sunday.

He didn't have to wait until then to receive news from them, though.

Four days after he went back to Hogwarts, right before dinner, he had a premonition of his silver falcon wanting to reach him. Sensing it was important and not wanting everyone to notice Harold Thomson's bird,

Harry discreetly Apparated to the Shrieking Shack, out of the school's wards. Between other functions, said wards were preventing the messenger owls from delivering their messages immediately – as it would disturb the classes. The waiting birds were kept in a protected part of the Owlery until the next breakfast.

Once in the Shack's attic, Harry opened a window and waited a few minutes before seeing his tired falcon. He welcomed the bird with a few treats he had nicked from Hogwarts kitchens beforehand, and Quicksilver thanked him before falling asleep on his shoulder. Harry then opened the letter. It was from Japan.

Hi son,

I just found the psychiatrist you told me about. He's quite inquisitive in his questioning, but I didn't tell him about our home life yet. He talked a great deal about my finances, though, and criticized my new haircut. I think he'll want to meet me again, but I don't think I'll keep him. By the by, his two secretaries are quite ugly as well.

That put aside, how is school? I do hope that you'll behave and show honour to your House, but I'm not delusional.

Daddy

Harry smirked. Jorg and Vernon had outdone themselves with hidden messages, he thought. Basically, the letter told him that the CIA agent, whose mental portrait he had given to his family, had found Vernon's work place – but not their apartment – and had been asking questions left and right. She didn't seem to have recognized him, but he knew she would come back later. And she had two bodyguards.

Harry looked at his watch thoughtfully. The report matched Genevieve's memories, and he should go there as soon as possible to keep the agent's nose out of his family's business. However, it was night time in Japan and he hadn't eaten yet. He prepared for another jump when he heard voices from downstairs. He immediately thought it was Remus and Sirius arguing, but it wasn't an everyday occurrence, and that line of thought got shot down anyways when he recognized one of the voices.

Snape.

As silently as he had arrived, he Apparated out and, sticking to the gaseous reality, headed downstairs, temporarily Silencing his falcon in the way. He didn't find anyone in the house at all, though. He knew that certain things didn't appear the same in the gaseous reality, and he decided to Apparate in an empty closet – the two Marauders had perhaps refurnished the house, but it wasn't filled with linen and clothes yet.

As soon as he did, he heard the voices nearer and, from something Sirius had told him once, he understood that the voices belonged to people away from there. Through the portal between the Shack and Sirius' family house in London, Harry was hearing Snape arguing with Moody.

‘It must be the charred bird club's meeting.’ he thought, and wondered why Moody hadn't Silenced the zone already, paranoid as he was. He got his answer immediately, though.

“I can't do that, Snape.” the scarred Auror was saying. “And, even if I could, I would need a better reason to do it, especially for you. Let's sit, now, so that I can secure the room. Walls have ears, you know.” he said, interrupting a grumbled sentence from the Potion Master. “Constant vigilance, I always say. Silencio.”

And Harry didn't hear them anymore. Reflecting about the fact that they hadn't started yet, Harry decided to go there – in London – and to stay in the gaseous reality to hear them. A minute later, he found himself in the middle of a meeting of the Order of the Phoenix. Unfortunately, being late and his hearing being impaired by the gaseous reality, he didn't understand what they were talking about, except that it was some kind of a status report regarding political alliances.

After straining his ears for a few minutes, Harry had enough. Not knowing most of the people around the table, he didn't even want to

try to breach one of their minds for information about politics, and decided to leave.

After all, he was hungry and had a trip to Japan to prepare. Apparating back to Hogwarts, he released his falcon in the Owlery for him to rest, and ate a good dinner before going back to his dorm. Given the time difference between England and Japan, he could still take a short nap before heading there.

That's what he did.

A few hours later, a well-fed and refreshed Harry arrived in Japan just as the sun was rising on the Country of the Rising Sun.

After putting Quicksilver back in his room, Harry discussed his plan with his uncle and accompanied him to the bank while being hidden in the gaseous reality. They didn't have to wait long for agent Mohavez's face to show on the control screens. Vernon had sent word to the security agents, and a small squad escorted her and her guards in his office before closing the door.

After motioning to a chair and waiting for the woman to sit down, Vernon addressed her.

"What do you want, Miss?"

Carla Mohavez, although surprised by the man's openness, opened her mouth to answer, before frowning. She suddenly didn't remember why she was there and, in fact, the more she thought about it, the more blurred her memories were. Seven seconds after having opened her mouth, she couldn't remember anything about the man's identity and her purpose here. The eleventh second saw her convinced that her mission in Japan had been a failure. At second sixteenth, she had a clear understanding of what her mission had been, and, after five more seconds, she was convinced that any note, memo, or file pertaining to Harry Calder Dursley had to be destroyed as soon as she would find them.

The two bodyguards were looking at each other, surprised at their hyperactive boss' lack of answer, but their eyes became glassy as well for a few short seconds.

Harry smiled. The two gorillas hadn't known anything of importance, and they had been easier and quicker to deal with.

Carla Mohavez closed her mouth suddenly, before opening it again. "Thank you for your assistance, sir." she said, and headed outside, her bodyguards following.

'Even easier than I thought.' Harry mentally sent to his uncle, who jumped in surprise. 'Err... sorry. Didn't mean to startle you. I'm leaving, now. I have a night of sleep to get.'

Vernon Dursley nodded, and Harry hurled himself through space again. Just before leaving Japan, though, he remembered something, and went back to Goken to tell him about his apartment address. Half an hour later, he was back in his bed to recover from the round trip journey.

The following weeks passed peacefully, and the school was preparing for Halloween. Hagrid was harvesting gigantic pumpkins, and a general atmosphere of feast could be felt.

Of course, that was when Snape or Malfoy weren't there.

The blond boy seemed to have had his mind cleaned of recipes and refilled with dangerous spells at some point: Harry witnessed him casting a Cutting spell once, to make a hurrying first year's schoolbag empty its content on the floor, and to mock the poor boy afterwards. Despite knowing that Snape had a hand behind it, Harry couldn't let him continue that, and he went back to his mind. This time, rather than removing the dangerous spells, he just changed the boy's memories of them by a tad bit. Harry either separated them from the others, making them unreachable, linked them to Malfoy's pain channels, or even scrambled them so that the spell would fizzle harmlessly.

Snape was another story entirely, and Harry was tempted to return to the man's mind to do something about it. However, the Potion Master

was always having an eye on him, and interrupted his thoughts whenever he stayed without moving for more than five minutes. He was also shocked when the man gave their assignments back and he found a T on his. When he had tried to ask about it, the man had shocked him – and his classmates – by removing 10 points from Slytherin. He then proceeded in a diatribe against cheating that was clearly directed at Harry, and the boy sulked afterwards.

On top of that, Harry was starting to develop a constant headache. He knew that absorbing memories by copying them in his mind was taking more space than when he learned them the proper way, and he felt like his mind was... full, or something. He then decided to get rid of several unnecessary memories, but it wasn't easy to choose. And he couldn't even remove a language since all the language-related memories had agglomerated in a single package long ago.

There was something he could do to free space, though. It was in the book he had bought with James, back in Japan. When he had read it, he had found interesting algorithms concerning data security and consistency, and had also found several compression and encryption programs. One Sunday morning, Harry decided to stay in bed and to apply these algorithms to his memories, starting by his fake identities. As these identities had been perfected through time, including numerous false memories, they were taking a large space. They also weren't useful when not in use, and Harry reflected that he could compress them in order to keep his mind working properly. Even if he would have to take a couple of seconds to restore them when switching identities, it would still be better that way. After all, he always switched identities when in the gaseous reality, so, why bother at all?

The other thing he experimented successfully with was his Apparation techniques. Some time ago, he had started to reflect about the possibility of making only a part of himself Apparate in or out. During the experiment, he lost a few fingers – which he re-grew quickly thanks to his powers – but finally reached a level of control where he could Apparate only his fingertips' skin or his eardrum. The first allowed him to grasp or release tangible things while still being hidden in the gaseous reality, and pull these things with him, while

the other allowed him to hear better. After his eavesdropping experience, he definitely thought that it would be useful.

After testing his hearing successfully, he wanted to do it with his eyes as well, but the evening's meal was one of the most important of the year and he went to the Great Hall with his friends instead.

The Halloween feast was impressive, as usual. Someone even played a prank on the whole student body at some time, and everyone was suddenly clad in pumpkin-worthy orange robes. Because it resembled the Chudley Cannons' colours, Ron was ecstatic and thanked his twin brothers. Harry glanced at Fred and George, but they looked shocked, and he understood it wasn't their handiwork. His gaze travelled around the room until it reached the head table, where Sirius was drinking from his glass with a smug expression. Harry smiled at him, catching the man's attention, and Sirius nodded. For Harry, pranks were good as long as they weren't dangerous – meaning that they didn't touch his thought processes.

After Halloween, the Gryffindor and Slytherin Quidditch teams went into overdrive in their practises. Of course, with Snape behind him, Malfoy succeeded in booking the pitch at the best times, and the red and golden players had to use the pitch at sunrise or sunset, or during the meals. On top of that, the Slytherin captain didn't make their practise times useful at all, prancing around in his ironed uniform all the time. Checking with the boy's peripheral thoughts, Harry understood that Malfoy's main goal for booking the pitch was to remove the training time from the other team, not training his own.

Harry was feeling bad for Ron, but couldn't do much about it. At Wednesday lunch, he saw him coming early so that he could pack food for the team, and he contacted him mentally.

'Hello, Ron.'

'Hmmm... hi.' the redhead answered, and Harry distinctively felt that Ron didn't want that conversation.

'I'm sorry about Malfoy.'

‘Yeah, whatever.’

‘I have an idea you might like, though.’

‘What is it?’

‘Since you know Transfiguration, you know that it could be possible to create hoops on the other side of the castle.’

The other boy kept silent, processing the idea.

‘Do you think that you’d be able to do so?’ asked Harry.

‘Me, no, but I think that, with the seven of us, we should be able to do it.’ A short pause. ‘Thanks, mate. Sorry for the cold shoulder.’

‘No need, Ron. It’s Malfoy we have here.’

‘Trip him for me, would you?’ Ron asked with a smile.

Harry smiled too. ‘Will do, mate. Will do.’

Ron exited the Great Hall, the smile still on his face. That evening, and the last days before the game, the Gryffindor team ate with everyone, to Malfoy’s dismay.

“Welcome, students, teachers, and guests, to the first Quidditch game of the year.” Lee Jordan’s voice boomed through the Quidditch pitch. “Let’s present the teams, now: we will have the pleasure to see last year’s winning team returning for an encore.” He paused, and started naming the players as they were shooting off the changing rooms. “Here are Oliver Wood, Keeper and Captain; Ron Weasley, Seeker; Fred and George Weasley, Beaters extraordinaire; and finally: Katie Bell, Alicia Spinnet, and Angelina Johnson, who is my favourite although she doesn’t want to get out with me.”

“Jordan!” interrupted McGonagall.

“Ah uh... sorry, Professor.” Jordan said, but everyone knew he wasn’t. The black boy had commented the games for a long time now, and most of the listeners appreciated his twisted way of doing it. Even when McGonagall was interrupting him. In fact, the two of them were almost doing a scene play themselves, the teacher doing the “straight man.”

“So, these were the Chasers for GRYFFINDOR!” Jordan exclaimed, and the Gryffindor House cheered their players, while the others applauded politely. The Slytherins booed, of course – it was customary to do so in events of the like, even when you were ultimately polite.

“And now, today’s losers are-”

“Jordan!” McGonagall interrupted him again.

“I meant contenders, Professor.” the boy answered, and the stern woman huffed. “The Slytherin team is made of Draco Malfoy, Seeker and Captain; Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle, Beaters; Adrian Pucey, Wendy Fawcett, and Tracey Davis, Chasers; and Kentaro Anderson, Keeper for SLYTHERIN!”

Even if, for obvious reasons, the commentary had been less enthusiastic, Jordan succeeded in leading the crowd, and cheers emanated from the silver-and-green part of the stands while the Gryffindors booed accordingly.

“And here is Madam Hooch, who will referee the game.” said Jordan as the flying instructor advanced on the pitch, dragging the balls’ trunk.

“Now, I want a fair game.” she said, looking at both captains – and one could have sworn that she looked at Malfoy longer than Wood. “Captains, shake hands.”

They did, before returning to their posts.

“The Bludgers are released.” Jordan stated. “And the Snitch is, too. Madam Hooch takes the Quaffle, throws it, aaaaand... the game starts!”

The game started with the Gryffindors taking hold of the Quaffle and passing it in formation. The opposing Chasers tried to get the large ball from them but the red and gold players were too tightly packed for the Slytherin to stand a chance at that. Alicia Spinnet arrived in front of the goals, where Harry was waiting for her. Harry could have turned his back to the play and catch the Quaffle easily, but he didn't want to outdo himself.

Spinnet threw the ball to the hoop she thought was the most out of reach for the Slytherin Keeper, but Harry "managed" to deflect the ball, conveniently throwing it toward Tracey. The green-and-silver Chasers then regrouped and flew toward the Gryffindor goals. Fred and George were active, though, and the Bludgers thrown their way hindered them quite a bit, and they lost the Quaffle to the hands of Angelina Johnson, flying underneath them for just that.

Harry smiled. Contrarily to Malfoy self-obsessed "practise" sessions, the Gryffindors seemed to have trained actual Quidditch moves and worked like a team. He noticed the three girls lunging at him, each of them with their outer robe in a bundle under their arm.

Quidditch moves? Yeah, sure.

He didn't break a sweat, though, knowing full well which one had the ball, and successfully blocked the ball sent his way by Katie Bell. With the Quaffle firmly in his hand, he dodged one of the Bludgers before throwing the ball forward forcefully.

Too forcefully? No... he had acted like it, but had restrained himself.

The Quaffle hurtled through half the field, before being recovered by Pucey. The Slytherin Chaser then threw it with all his might to Fawcett, who passed it to Tracey, who had been waiting behind the hoops line. Bending forward, she slammed the ball through the hoop in front of her.

“Unbelievable!” exclaimed Jordan while the Slytherin stands cheered. “It’s the first time the snakes-”

“Jordan!”

“-score first. Sorry, Professor, but it’s true.” the commentating boy amended.

The surprise was short-lived, as the Gryffindor Chasers were attacking again. After a few more back-and-forth action, the Slytherin scored again, much to Oliver Wood’s consternation.

After a few more goals scored by the Slytherins, Harry decided to let one pass, just to avoid appearing invincible. Besides, the Gryffindors were mightily annoyed by the 70-to-nothing score and started to play interesting combinations that he suspected Ron’s book had a part in. He did as though he believed in Katie Bell’s feint and lunged to the right, while Spinnet passed the ball to Johnson, who scored.

Harry could have sworn the cheer coming from the red-and-gold stands had an undertone of relief.

‘You don’t have to do that.’ came an annoyed sentence from above.

He looked up and noticed Ron not far from him. He smirked. Trust Ron to notice that sort of things. ‘I just have to appear real.’ he answered.

‘Yeah, yeah. Just beware; I have a few cards down my sleeve.’

‘Really?’ asked Harry amusedly. ‘And when exactly are you going to play- hey!’

‘Right now.’ Ron answered, and Harry felt the amusement behind his friend’s voice. Harry had been distracted by the talk and had missed another feint, and the Gryffindor scored again.

‘It won’t work twice, you know?’ Harry said.

‘I know. But I have other tricks.’ Ron finished smugly, before flying off.

The Slytherin was half-tempted to fetch said tricks from Ron’s mind, but he refrained. Ron was a friend of his and, as such, Harry had long since forbidden himself to enter his mind without his permission.

While the Seekers circled the pitch in search of the Snitch, the Quaffle play continued. To their dismay, the Gryffindor Chasers saw their next attempts blocked. Harry was focused on the game, now, and the weird comments coming from Ron didn’t reach him anymore.

However, after a few more goals, something else happened. Harry was waiting for the next Quaffle attack but he felt Ron coming from behind him and moved out of the way, and Spinnet scored easily.

Harry frowned. ‘Hey!’ he sent to Ron, who had recovered the normal Seeking height.

‘What?’ asked his friend innocently, before turning serious. ‘With you on board, and within the limits of the rules, I’m doing what I can to help my team-mates without giving away your secrets, so don’t complain.’

‘Alright, alright.’ Harry answered before focusing on the incoming Quaffle. Speaking of which, he suddenly realized something. After throwing the ball to Wendy Fawcett again, he looked up and almost laughed. He would have, if he hadn’t been in his place. Trust Malfoy to establish strategies centred on his person!

Crabbe and Goyle, the two Beaters, were tagging their Captain like a shadow, merely deflecting the lone Bludger thrown their way, while not doing anything to protect the Chasers and him, or even hinder the opposing Chasers’ attacks.

“Crabbe! Goyle!” he yelled. “Come here and play!”

The two addressed boys looked at each other and almost obeyed, but Malfoy called them back and they resumed their escort service while the action continued lower.

“Crabbe and Goyle, you dimwits!” Harry called again, after deflecting yet another attack. “Are you going to play or not?”

Despite the ongoing game, Malfoy descended to Harry’s altitude and glared at him. “They are protecting the Captain, Anderson.” he said as Goyle batted a Bludger away. “See? If you don’t like it, you can leav- oof!”

The blond boy’s speech was interrupted by Harry pushing him away to catch the incoming Quaffle. In the process, the second Bludger struck him in the arm, and he distinctively heard – and felt – a bone snap.

“Timeout!” Harry yelled, still holding the Quaffle in his valid arm, and he landed. Only the Captain could call a timeout, though, but Harry wasn’t going to move before Malfoy called it. And, as he had the Quaffle firmly in his arm, he effectively blocked the game. Malfoy looked around and noticed Hooch’s pointed look. With visible reluctance, he called for said break and both teams landed. During the by-play, though, Harry had had the necessary time to use his Metamorphmagus powers to hastily repair his fractured bone. An incensed Harry glared at Malfoy and his gorillas as they were landing nearby.

“What in the nine circles of Hell do you think you are doing?” he demanded. “It is Quidditch we play, here, not a game of tag!”

“You have no right to ask anything!” Malfoy yelled back. “In case you don’t know it, I am the Captain.”

“That’s no excuse for being dumb!” Harry answered curtly. “Besides, I wasn’t talking to you. I was talking to the two dimwits who actually serve as your personal escort.” he said, turning back to the two boys. “It’s your job to deflect Bludgers from all the team members, and to

hinder the opposing Chasers when they come too close to the hoops. Understood?"

Malfoy didn't let them enough time to nod stupidly. "They are protecting me from Bludgers!"

"You aren't the only player to protect, Malfoy! The Chasers are down there, slowed by Bludgers sent from the Gryffindor Beaters, yet your goons forgot to return the courtesy to our adversaries. But, since you want to talk about you, let's. Can I ask why you came disturbing the play near my hoops?"

"Your hoops?" asked Malfoy with a smirk. "Do you think you own them?"

"For the duration of that game, yes! It's my job, actually, and I was doing fine before you intruded!"

"I intruded? How dare you! You..." Malfoy seemed too angry for coherent speech for a few seconds. "Fine! You don't like my captaincy? You are free to leave the team! Or better yet, I order you to leave!" he finished smugly.

Harry opened his mouth to answer, but was prevented by someone else's voice.

"I don't think you should do that."

It was Madam Hooch, who had come to see what the fuss was about.

"You don't have any Reserve players, and removing your only Keeper mid-game will surely benefit to the Gryffindors." she added.

Malfoy seemed at a loss, before he relented wordlessly. Mounting his broom, he kicked off angrily.

"Does that mean you'll do your job, now?" Harry asked Crabbe and Goyle.

The glassy look he received remembered him of who he was talking to, and he sighed as the two boys followed Malfoy.

‘Ron.’ he called mentally. ‘I need you to organize something with the twins.’

‘Yes?’ asked the redhead. ‘Anything to lower your chances of success, my lord.’ he added sarcastically. ‘By the way, what was it about, downstairs?’

‘Malfoy and his personal Beaters.’

‘Oh. I see.’ A pause. ‘And what do you suggest?’

‘Play interference while your brothers throw the two Bludgers at the dumb and despotic blond. With any luck, the two gorillas up there will miss one. Or two.’

‘Will do.’ came the reply, and Harry felt Ron’s amusement. ‘Gladly.’ the redhead added.

The play continued and, a couple minutes after Ron quietly informed his brothers about the situation, Harry saw the redheads’ act. And it was successful. Seeing Malfoy’s broom in splinters and the boy plummet to the cushioned ground made Harry’s day better than a few goals.

However, because of the permanent Cushioning spell on the pitch, Malfoy was only bruised; although Harry was sure his pride had a larger welt than his backside. As soon as he found his voice back, Malfoy called for a timeout.

“What is it?” asked Harry when the team landed around their Captain.

“My broom is broken.” answered the blond with an evil glint in his eyes.

“And?”

“Give me yours.”

Harry considered his options. He could refuse, and that would yield another rant. He could also accept. After all, he didn't even need a broom to fly, actually. He would do fine with the school's old Cleansweep Seven brooms.

“It wasn't mine anyways.” he said, pushing the sleek broom in Malfoy's hands so forcefully that the boy recoiled a few steps. While the other members of the team explained the by-play to Hooch, Harry went to the changing rooms to fetch one of the old brooms in the locker there.

Back in the play, nothing changed much. Harry continued to protect his hoops almost infallibly while the Slytherin Chasers succeeded in scoring time and time again. Of course, Wood blocked several attempts, but the Gryffindor's counter-attack seemed to always be prevented. The two Seekers were still circling the pitch, and the Slytherin Beaters were still "protecting" their Captain. Obviously, the Bludger attack had reinforced Malfoy's unhealthy paranoia and tyranny.

At one point, Harry felt Ron behind him, preparing for a distracting move. When the redhead started it, Harry reacted by sending a particular message to his friend.

‘The Snitch! On the grass on the middle of the pitch!’

Naturally, that got Ron's attention and the redhead shot past him. He was too high to be a real distraction, though, and Harry intercepted the Quaffle efficiently. Someone had seen Ron's dive, though. Malfoy started, interpreting Ron's sudden move as the start of an actual chase for the Snitch. On his top-of-the-range broom, the blond boy shot after his Gryffindor counterpart.

Ron was speeding toward the ground, looking right and left for a sign of the fluttering golden ball, when he realized he had been had.

However, the whooshing sound behind him hinted at an approaching player or ball, and he pulled out of the way sharply.

Draco Malfoy didn't have much experience of the actual Seeker job and tricks and before he could react, his quicker broom brought him in close contact with the ground again, shattering itself in the process – the Cushioning charms had been made to protect any human falling, and the broom shot through them.

“And that's a perfectly executed Wronski Feint from our star Seeker Ronald Weasley.” Jordan exclaimed, and McGonagall didn't squirm at his impartiality, this time. Ron blinked at the cheers and smiled suddenly, forgetting Harry's deceit. He knew he should thank him someday, though: fooling an opposing Seeker with such a move was rare and it gave him an edge in experience – even if it had been involuntary from the start.

Malfoy seemed to need more time to come around this time, and it was with Crabbe's broom that he continued the game – he couldn't argue against the Chasers' need for speed, after all.

By the time the Snitch was found, the Slytherins had scored several more times, while Harry only let the Quaffle pass a few times. Half of these were purely voluntary from his part, while the other half was due to a concerted effort from four or more players. With that many players, his attention was split and it was a bit easier to find a crack in his defence.

With the current score, the Gryffindors knew that catching the Snitch would not give them victory. It would allow them to keep their head high, though, and Ron was pushed in the chase by desperation and the cheers of everyone in the stadium – except the Slytherins, of course.

Malfoy had a faster broom, but had never pushed it to its limits – until recently, that is, when meeting the ground the second time. He quickly understood that a high level of control was necessary to keep a stable trajectory at high speeds. That lesson was brought home equally quickly by the boy's collision with the Gryffindor's middle hoop, and Ron could snatch the Snitch almost serenely.

The final score was of 290 points for the Slytherins, and 260 for the Gryffindors.

When Malfoy came about, several minutes later, he was rather flustered of not having caught the Snitch and lashed out towards his preferred target.

“Anderson!” he yelled, although he winced immediately, his ears still ringing from the impact with the goal pole. “Give back your broom; we are going to have tryouts for a replacement.”

Harry looked at him with wide eyes. “This,” he said through clenched teeth and handing his broom right in front of the other boy’s eyes so he could see, “is a school broom, not yours.”

“Whatever.” answered Malfoy airily. “You won’t use it anymore.”

“Despite Anderson’s abysmal level, I think you should show pity and keep him.” a silky voice said, interrupting Harry’s diatribe even before it started. The other players enlarged their circle to allow their Head of House in.

“But...” started the blond.

Snape glared at him, denying him the right to answer, before turning to Harry. “And I’m sure he will appreciate the honour made to him and thank you.” he stated, as if it was a patented truth.

Harry kept silent, fuming. After all, the man had told him not to speak out of turn, hadn’t he? His anger melted into a cold determination and he kept his mouth shut. He wouldn’t answer until directly addressed.

“He will thank you, or he will suffer detention.” Snape snarled, and it was his turn to be angry.

Harry stayed silent, his gaze unfocused and a small smile gracing his features. He royally ignored the man.

“Detention, Anderson!” exclaimed Snape. “Right now, and with me. I’m sure that you won’t need the party that-”

“You talked to me, sir?” Harry asked. “Why do I get a detention, exactly?”

“That’s what I want to know as well.” a voice said behind Snape, and he whirled around, ready to launch a rant against whoever dared interrupt him. His words never left his mouth, though.

“Did I hear correctly, Severus?” asked Dumbledore. “Were you going to inflict a detention to the boy who defended his hoops so well? I surely have problems with my hearing, I think. Old age, you know, and all this sort of things.” he finished with a twinkle in his eyes. It wasn’t amused, though.

While Snape tried to find an interesting answer, Harry noticed Sirius and Remus behind the Headmaster, and mentally thanked them.

‘ Anytime.’ Remus answered. ‘We just suggested that he congratulate the winners.’ the man continued, before chuckling internally. ‘I think Padfoot isn’t used to mental talks.’

Harry smiled and Sirius shrugged noncommittally, before they refocused on the talk at hand.

“I must have meant that the boy was... obligated to participate in the party.” said Snape, swallowing his pride. “With his saves and all.”

“That’s what I thought.” Dumbledore said, before nodding at the students. “Nice game, all of you.”

He then left, and Snape bristled. He knew very well that the Headmaster’s nod hadn’t been addressed to the whole team. Grabbing Malfoy by the arm and preventing Crabbe and Goyle from following with a glare, he quickly walked towards the castle, the blond struggling to keep up. Harry smirked. If that wasn’t a sign of an upcoming talking-to, what was?

He followed the other Slytherins toward the dungeon, clasping a few hands on the way.
Five days later...

The Quidditch game was soon forgotten, as the academics returned to full speed. And, likewise, the enthusiasm of the Slytherins for Harry's performance as Keeper fell flat. Especially with Snape's new behaviour. Once the man had started removing points, he didn't stop. During Wednesday Potion lesson, Harry lost points for making noise dragging his chair, for disturbing the ingredients while fetching them, for answering the man's questions – he was correct, but Snape said the tone was mocking.

And, of course, Malfoy was taking advantage of it to slander him even more.

The reaction from the other Slytherins was quite cold. Most of Harry's Housemates believed that he must have done something really bad to provoke Snape into removing points from his own House, something that had never happened before. They believed Malfoy's lies, and Harry didn't have time to correct the memories of each and every one of them. Harry wanted to Oblivate Malfoy once more, but he reflected that if he did so, Snape would start to have doubts of his innocence. He bade his time, waiting for the right moment.

And an opportunity showed itself during the Defence Against the Dark Arts period the next day.

"Welcome, class." Remus said, greeting the students as they entered the classroom. While they settled down, they had the surprise of seeing the other teacher running around the other room. Harry snorted, having grasped the amused thought from Remus' peripheral thoughts, but he didn't act on it.

"Now that you are comfortably seating, stand up." Remus said, and the students looked at each other in askance before doing so. "Remove your school robes." the werewolf continued. "If you are

properly attired underneath, of course.” he added with an amused twinkle in his eyes.

Some students laughed, but most were still nervous at the unusual request, and they obeyed it slowly.

“Now, line up here, please.” Remus said, standing, and the hesitant student body obeyed. The man extracted his wand and transfigured Finnigan’s shoes into running trainers.

“Now, run.” he said and, while Seamus was starting to jog after Sirius, Remus continued his Transfiguration. A few girls declared that they didn’t want their costly shoes to be altered – which got Ron’s eyes rolling, a gesture quickly followed by most of the other boys.

“Don’t worry.” Remus said, transfiguring Zabini’s shoes and sending the boy after the others. “I know what I’m doing.”

“Whatever.” Malfoy said arrogantly. “I’m not going to get my shoes touched by a werewolf.”

Everyone froze, and Harry found himself with a half-finished pair of trainers.

Turning slowly toward the smug boy, Remus spoke coldly. “What do you think you are doing?”

“I’m stating the truth.” Malfoy answered with aplomb.

“Since you seem so interested in werewolves,” started Remus, marching menacingly toward the boy, “You will tell the class how to detect one.”

“Easy.” continued Malfoy. “They transform into beasts during the full moon, their human shape is shabby around said full moon, and they are vulnerable to silver.”

“Now kindly tell your comrades, Mister Malfoy, what is the today’s date.”

“Err... Thursday, sir?”

“The date is Thursday, November 12th, Malfoy.” Remus had dropped pretences and the "Mister" at the same time, and took one more step towards the now trembling boy. “In case you didn’t attend Astronomy three days ago, know that we are exactly the day after the full moon.” Another step. “Do I look shabby to you, Malfoy?”

“Err...” was all the addressed boy could utter before being interrupted by Remus.

“Where was I during yesterday evening’s dinner?” Remus asked, knowing full well that he had attended said dinner. Despite Snape knowing that he was a werewolf, the Potion Master didn’t know the specifics of when he was supposed to turn into a wolf. Said Potion Master knew how to brew the Wolfsbane potion, and he usually made a batch for Remus each month. Thanks to Harry, though, Remus didn’t need it anymore, and he had given his last vials to friendly werewolves he knew.

Malfoy didn’t remember if the man had been there at dinner, though. “I don’t know.”

“Sir.”

“What?”

“Pardon me?”

Malfoy looked stumped, and Remus straightened up, bringing his full stature in front of the boy. “You will address me with "Sir" like it is expected from students talking to a Professor. And you will talk politely as well.”

Malfoy looked defiant. “You can’t order me around.”

“I can’t?” asked Remus, genuinely impressed at the boy’s gall. “Do you have a Sickle, Malfoy?”

The blond didn't react, and Harry approached Remus from behind, fishing a silver coin from his pocket – their morning's Transfiguration period had been about precious metals. 'I hope you know what you are doing.' he mentally projected before coughing discreetly, the proffered coin on his outstretched hand.

Remus turned toward him and nodded briefly before looking at Malfoy again. "If I was a werewolf, what would happen if I take that coin?" he asked.

Malfoy didn't know the answer to that question, and he just shrugged.

"I would drop it immediately and my hand would have a scar." Remus said, before grasping the coin.

In front of Malfoy's eyes, he turned the coin from one finger to the other for a few seconds before throwing it back to Harry.

The blond boy's eyes followed the coin and he frowned, noticing Harry. "I don't trust him."

"Enough! You ridiculed yourself sufficiently for today. Now that the proof of my species is made, I can ask you repayment for your insult."

Malfoy blanched. "But... Snape said..." he started, before slamming his mouth shut.

Remus approached until his nose almost touched the boy's, and he bit into the air, his teeth making an ominous noise. Malfoy jumped back with a rather unmanly yelp, and tumbled into his bodyguards.

Remus looked ready to lash at the boy again when a voice in his head stopped him. 'Don't, please.'

'What?' he asked back.

'I'd rather have him here as a punching bag rather than outside, plotting Merlin knows what.' Harry said. Sensing the man's

interrogation, he anticipated it as well. 'You wanted to expel him from Defence. And I think it wouldn't be wise to remind Snape that he could do so with me as well.'

Remus stayed silent for a few seconds, before agreeing. With a complicated motion of his wand, pink trainers replaced Malfoy's shoes and he hauled the boy up and through the opening towards the runners. 'Satisfied?'

'Very. Since you are going to cover duelling again soon, can you pair us?'

'You know, Harry, if I didn't know differently, I'd say you are entirely too chummy with mister Sleek Hair.'

Harry snorted audibly.

"Yes, Mister Anderson?" asked Remus, reverting to a voiced conversation.

"Nothing, sir. You didn't finish my shoes, that's all."

"Alright, alright." Remus said, before finishing the spell.

Once everyone had run for a few more laps, Sirius stopped them all.

"Great!" he said. "Now stand in a circle."

The muggleborns, reminiscing muggle primary school, understood the exercise and put themselves in proper position, keeping a safe distance between them. They then started to flex their hands and feet, while the purebloods looked at a loss at the task. Sirius quickly told them what to do, though, and soon, everyone was repeating the same moves, Malfoy included.

'What was the thing with the coin?' Harry asked Remus while they were bending forward, trying to touch their toes.

‘Since you healed me, I tested how long I could touch silver things without having welts.’ Remus answered. ‘It hurt like hell, though.’

‘You’re a good actor.’ Harry replied.

‘Stop praising the beast and pay attention to the exercise. You are the only one standing.’ Remus answered smugly, and Harry opened his eyes to see everyone doing push-ups.

An hour later, the teens were in different levels of sweat and tiredness. The sweat was treated quickly – a properly focused Scourgify from Remus did it for the whole class – and Sirius started talking again.

“Now you can perhaps grasp why physical fitness is important. Look at you. Do you think that all of you are able to sustain a duel, right now?”

“But, we aren’t going to run like that beforehand either.” protested Malfoy.

“You’ll never know, Mister Malfoy. You’ll never know. Even if you don’t need much strength during the duel proper, you need to be fit to evade spells. If you aren’t able to speak properly after climbing a few stairs, you’ll have problems casting spells as well.”

“You spoke about not needing much strength in the duel, sir.” Harry said. “What do you mean?”

Sirius looked at him. “Essentially, casting spells doesn’t involve much strength.”

“What if the opponents decide to use more than spells?” Harry insisted.

“More than spells?” asked Remus with a raised eyebrow. “I don’t think that you’ll find many people versed in fist fighting around here, Mister Anderson.”

“Even if I don’t agree, because I know some muggleborn students who went to martial arts classes, I wasn’t speaking about that.” he said and, to answer his teacher’s still-questioning gaze, he took a Knut from his pocket and transfigured it into a sword.

It took a few seconds for the teachers to process what he wanted, and the students took an even longer time, several of them impressed by the Transfiguration work.

“Remarkable work.” said Remus with a smirk. “I’m sure Professor McGonagall would have appreciated. I can’t give points for it, though.”

‘Even if Snape thinks I’m a drain hole for the Slytherin points, I’m not fishing for points. I got a fair share of them in Transfiguration this morning.’ Harry replied mentally, before nodding.

A blond Slytherin decided to put his two Knuts in again, though.

“It’s of no use! People don’t fight with swords anymore nowadays, and you can’t cast spells while waving the thing all the time.”

“Having learnt to use both the wand and the sword, I can assure you it is possible.” Harry said.

“Care to explain to the class your ideas about it?” asked Remus with an amused twinkle in his eyes.

Harry caught the man’s amusement, but he was too taken by his demonstration to read his thoughts, and he started explaining to a stunned class how wielding a one-handed blade could be compatible with casting spells.

Much later, he was in the middle of an explanation about actually mixing magic with the sword when the bell rang.

He was startled by the sound and looked at the teachers accusingly. “You didn’t stop me.”

“You were gone so far that we didn’t think it would be a good idea to do so.” Remus answered, his amusement still showing, and Harry caught it this time.

He paled slightly. “You can’t be serious.”

“ No, I’m not.” the werewolf answered. “He is over there, transfiguring the students’ shoes back.”

Harry gaped at the man. “You didn’t just make a poor joke on Sirius’ forename, did you?”

The werewolf nodded. “Yup.” he answered, and the boy groaned. “Honestly, you could give credit to my instincts.” Remus continued. “I’m sure that-”

“Don’t finish this sentence, please.”

“ As I was saying: I’m sure that you would do a fine teacher, someday.”

Harry groaned, and took his head in his hands. Several seconds later, Remus’ next words made him look up at him intently, though.

“I know how your favourite Potion Professor treats you, Mister Anderson. Take 100 points for replacing your teachers for a hour.” he said in the almost-deserted classroom – except Tracey, the other students had already left.

Harry looked at him, and blinked owlshly. If needed, the elapsed period was a proof that the unflappable boy could still be surprised. Since that day, the student body noticed that Snape was more and more hostile, taking points and handing out detentions for the slightest mishap. Meeting the man in the corridor had already been a depressing moment, but it became dreaded as the week progressed. It culminated on the next Wednesday, when Harry attended Snape’s Potion period.

“Ah. Mister Anderson.” he sneered as soon as Harry had put a foot in the classroom. “Since it seems that a few teachers aren’t respecting the decisions I make in my classroom, I will start by removing the 100 points you received unjustly last week, and I’ll add another 50 to this withdrawal.” He smirked. “As interests.”

“You just said that some teachers aren’t respecting what happens in other teacher’s classrooms, sir. Do you categorize yourself with them? Because you just did that. I earned those points.” Harry asked.

“25 more points for your cheek, Anderson! I didn’t allow you to speak!”

“Still, I must be a special case, sir, since the other students don’t have to be allowed to speak in order to do so.”

“20 points! And you will sit down or I’ll take more!”

Harry was fed up. The man was such a pain in the rear! Even the Gryffindors were flabbergasted at the man’s zeal.

“You are bringing your own House down, sir. Why?”

“30 points for questioning your teacher.”

“What does happen if I question said teacher’s method?”

Snape’s usually pale face became rosy under the man’s anger. “That will be 50 points for even suggesting this!”

“So I can’t ask why you are unable to teach the proper guidelines for potion making, contenting in pasting a recipe on the board and yelling at students, can I?” Harry asked. “I wonder if you are even aware that your attitude brings even more harm to your own House – and I’m not talking about points, here. Speaking of points, what does this costs me? 500 points? More? You can’t take more than that, though: that’s all that’s left.” Harry finished cheekily.

The Potion Master didn't answer immediately. His face had gone from the rosy tinge to an unhealthy crimson during Harry's tirade, and he was breathing heavily. As he wasn't speaking, Harry prepared himself and approached him. In a voice low enough to only be heard by the man in front of him, he spoke again. "What if I insult the teacher... Snivellus?"

WHACK!

The action had been instinctual, not even controlled. Snape had slapped him. However, Harry had been ready, concentrating on toughness and stillness and had barely moved. Snape looked at his stinging hand in shock. It could have woken him up, but he was too far gone for rational thought.

Since his wand hand was painful, he took his wand with the other and, taking a step back, he levelled it at Harry. He paused, several spells tumbling in his head. He had half the mind to use an Unforgivable or another Dark spell on him, but his consciousness fought for minimal control, and he remembered where he was.

"Petrificatus Totalus." he said, and Harry complied, straightening up and falling back. It was exactly that, though: Harry had complied. In the same way he had been warned for Dumbledore's spell at the beginning of the term, he had had a vision of that very scene, and had cast the absorbing shield on himself again that morning. He was just playing his part, curious to see where the man would go from there. Thankfully, his toughened skin protected him from damage as he slammed on the stone floor.

'Don't worry.' he sent to his friends, and they understood. Ron sent a 'Brilliant, mate!' while Tracey sent her feelings of helplessness and hope that he wouldn't get too much hurt by the evil man.

Seeing the unmoving boy, Snape recovered his usual stance and he smirked before levitating him – the spell failed, but Harry had been able to wandlessly and wordlessly levitate by himself for a long time, and he moved according to the man's wand movements. "I think you would do fine in the sewers, with the other trash, Anderson." he

whispered in Harry's ear. "Meanwhile, you'll spend this classroom as a valet." he finished, motioning the unmoving boy to rest against the wall behind Malfoy's desk.

Snape knew that, when someone was Petrified by the spell, it was possible to change their position by forcibly bending their limbs, and he folded Harry's arms so that his forearms were protruding. He then took Malfoy's coat and schoolbag, and hung them there. After staring at the boy with a satisfied smirk, he started the lesson proper.

Harry was seething, but his determination helped him to keep a cool face. He had a few ideas, though. First of all, he was strong enough to keep the position for a long time, even with the blond's stuff on his arms, and he could wait for an appropriate moment for revenge. He looked as the students began preparing their potions, and waited.

He waited, and spied on Snape at the same time. The man was as predictable as his blond pet, and his rounds always took the same path. Harry discreetly pushed Malfoy's bag to the end of his fingers and waited some more seconds. Three... Two... One...

There are these moments where you would kill for a camcorder. Several of them, in fact, taking the scene from different angles. As it was, Harry had to content himself of his own point of view.

The bag fell to the ground with an ominous sound. 'Oops, guess there was something fragile in there.' thought Harry. At the exact same time, Snape was passing at that spot, and his right foot tangled itself with the bag's straps. Malfoy whirled around, alerted by the crashing sound, but he could only see Snape's arm flailing wildly, the man trying to recover balance. The blond boy's move surprised Crabbe, though, and the large boy dropped the whole container of lizard's scales in the cauldron, where it started to hiss angrily.

Snape's flailing arms tried to catch something to prevent his fall, and he found two things. Alas, none of these were strongly attached. The first was a handful of Malfoy's hair. The boy, sensing his hair being forcefully removed by the falling man, yelled and brought his hands to his face. Unfortunately, the hair had come from his forehead, and it was even more painful for the image-obsessed boy.

The other thing Snape had caught in his frantic moves to prevent his fall was Harry's shoulder. Not one to let pass a free shot at his Potion professor, especially now, Harry followed the fall in his frozen shape, taking good care to slam his fist in the man's left kidney. That done, he "assisted" the rules of gravity and rolled to the side, while Crabbe and Malfoy's sizzling cauldron was overflowing, unattended.

Snape wasn't in a proper state, quite stunned at his fall, and he didn't register the yelps and cries around him. He noticed, though, when a boiling liquid started attacking his skin. He shot up and, despite the pain, had the presence of mind to cast the spell required in these situations: the potion-freezing spell. It damaged a potion completely, but it prevented it to cause more damage than already done. Speaking of which...

The potion was still working its way on his face, and his feeling of pain came back full force, before he noticed the two students near him as well. It wasn't documented at all, or even known, but adding too many lizard scales to the anti-scar salve they had been brewing created a nice effect. That is... if you liked reptiles.

While Crabbe had only his right hand touched, Snape and Malfoy had received a large helping on the robes and face, and they were now sporting a scaly skin worthy of any snake.

The whole event hadn't lasted ten seconds, and the other students were too stunned to do anything. Shocked by the display, a couple of them even dropped what they were holding and, as Murphy's Law would have it, Neville Longbottom's dropped vial of phoenix tears – of which only a tenth of a drop was needed per cauldron – landed in his own preparation.

Snape being occupied at inspecting the damage done to his charges and himself – besides the obvious scales, that is – didn't remark the shy Gryffindor's predicament until it happened. The potion reacted strongly, expanding with such violence that the cauldron cracked under the pressure, and the liquid escaped the container by the most obvious choice: the cauldron's mouth. Neville, who had been bending over the recipient, was drenched by the liquid. The only other things

touched by the liquid were the overcoats of the students sitting in front of him – Dean Thomas and Ron – and Finnigan’s hands.

The Potion Master jumped at the sound of the liquid explosion nearby, and smirked when he noticed Longbottom drenched in the liquid. If he supposed that the Gryffindor would sport the same scales as him, he was in for a disappointment.

Nothing happened.

Except the fact that Longbottom was drenched, obviously.

Snape sighed. “Longbottom! Detent-” he started, before stopping suddenly. It wasn’t his voice! Except Malfoy, the students recoiled. Especially the purebloods.

He was hissing like a snake. It was a language, though, and he knew it. It was Parseltongue.

“You understand me?” he whispered to Malfoy, who had been received potion over his face as well.

It hadn’t reached the boy’s mouth, though. “Yes.” he said normally, and Snape nodded, before wincing. He was sore from his fall, and he hoped his face would heal quickly.

“Class dismissed.” he hissed, speaking to Malfoy but nodding at the class. “They stop the fires and clean. Finnigan will see Longbottom to the infirmary. We need to see Pomfrey and Dumbledore.”

The blond understood and repeated the man’s sentences – except the last one – to a bewildered class. While they were obeying wordlessly, Malfoy felt a certain level of pride at ordering a class around, but the Potion Master’s iron grip on his shoulder reminded him of the man’s last order. Snape looked in pain, and Malfoy rounded Crabbe and Goyle to help him to the infirmary. As he was grabbing his fallen schoolbag, he noticed Harry’s prone form.

“Sir?” he asked.

Already at the door, Snape turned around and noticed him pointing at Harry, a nasty interrogating look on his face. "Kick him, discreetly, and let him rot there." he said after a second. After all, only the blond boy could hear him, so why take precautions?

Since Harry's body was hidden from view by the desks, Malfoy dutifully obeyed, but, to his dismay, he didn't hear any sound of bone breaking or anything.

He then left the room, his bag in hand, and cursing his lack of precaution concerning the bottle of Unctuous Uncction he had smuggled in. He had wanted to give it to Harry at some point, but the boy had always pushed him away. Despite the favourable circumstances, he couldn't make him drink it in the classroom as well, the other students being too near not to notice.

Now, the bottle was broken and, given the stench that emanated from his bag when he grabbed it from the floor, he suspected that his Dungbombs were, too. Not wanting to be seen with the illegal potion's telltale container, he refrained from cleaning his bag until he could be alone. Something which happened quite quickly: Snape stopped him in front of the closest bathroom.

"Something to say?" he hissed, his nostrils flaring in disgust.

"No, sir." the boy answered, but his guilt was almost palpable.

"Go clean yourself, then." the man ordered, and he motioned Malfoy and Goyle toward the bathroom door before continuing his walk to the infirmary with Crabbe.

Malfoy went to the bathroom and put his bag on the sink counter. Not wanting to put his delicate hands in contact with the mess inside, he told Goyle to empty it carefully before looking at himself in a mirror nearby. He gasped. He wasn't touched as much as Snape had been, but the potion had splashed onto himself, damaging his uniform and coating the left side of his face, ear included. He had now scaly skin on it, and was only thankful that his eyes hadn't been touched. He

shuddered at a distant memory, remembering his father telling him that snakes were blind and could only see thanks to their tongue – which was basically false but the boy had never contradicted his father.

He noticed that Goyle had finished emptying his bag and was washing his hands thoroughly. ‘Is Goyle actually capable of independent thought?’ Malfoy silently wondered before heading to his possessions. He was on the verge of grasping one of his books when he heard Goyle complaining.

“Can’t... remove... sticky...” the large boy was grunting, rubbing his hands.

‘Reeking, too.’ Malfoy reflected, barely controlling his urge to puke at the smell that was now invading the whole bathroom, coming from his things. Using his wand, he levitated and inspected each and every single item. Those damaged by the potion returned in the bag and he gathered the few clean ones in his school robes. There wasn’t much to save.

Goyle was still washing his hands but Malfoy stopped him, ordering him to bring the stinking bag to the nearest waste bin and to come back to him in the infirmary afterwards.

It really was bad that Malfoy had been too stuck up in his own world to listen during the Charm period about household spells. Even if he would have needed to cast it several times, the Cleaning one would have prevented him from losing that many books. He didn’t care, though, because his parents could send replacements in the hour. Goyle wasn’t one to propose such charms as well, and the large boy dutifully searched for the nearest waste bin. The only one he knew being in his common room, he headed there.

Malfoy’s possessions wouldn’t be lost for everyone, though.
A few minutes earlier...

The foursome gone, the class broke in hushed whispers about Snape’s apparent Parseltongue ability and the man’s link to the Dark

Arts. Harry asked himself if the reaction would have been the same if a student – say, himself, for instance – would have displayed the gift in school.

He quickly stopped wondering when he noticed Tracey walking next to him. “Finite Incantatem.” she said, waving her wand in an unusual way. He understood and almost broke into laughter. Tracey had voiced the spell for effect, but hadn’t effectively cast it.

He played along, and sat, wincing – for the benefit of Pansy Parkinson, who was eyeing the two of them suspiciously. Tracey walked in front of her. “Need something?”

Pansy looked around her before leaning toward her. “Beware, mudblood.” she whispered. “You’ll have your day. After all, you’re not really a Prin- oof!”

She had been rudely interrupted by a certain redhead’s schoolbag banging in her back as the boy bolted out of the room, discussing excitedly with Dean Thomas. Try as she might, she would never know for sure if it had been intentional. Harry knew the truth, though.

‘Thanks, mate.’ he sent to the departing redhead.

‘No problem.’ was the faint answer.

Harry stood up, and made a few moves taken from Sirius’ Physical Education class to ease the possible cramps – at least to appear to do so. The show finished, he returned to his desk and took his schoolbag, before heading out with Tracey.

On their way to the inter-house common rooms, they crossed Goyle’s path and noticed him holding two schoolbags – although everyone wondered what could be in Crabbe and Goyle’s bags except food. The large boy’s one-track mind broadcasted his mission for any Legilimens to see, and Harry picked it up without even wanting to. He looked up. Malfoy’s schoolbag could be interesting for later.

Harry stopped Goyle and extended his hand, asking for the bag. The large boy frowned, unsure about what to do. As Goyle wasn't able to act and think at the same time, Harry took the bag from his slackened hand, before modifying his recent memories. Goyle turned around and went back to the infirmary, persuaded to have fulfilled his mission.

Checking that nobody was around, Harry took Merlin's wand out and Cleaned Malfoy's schoolbag and its content in one spell. He then stowed it in his own enlarged bag and returned Merlin's wand where it came from. He would sort the blond boy's possessions later.

His short internal debate, about whether it was theft or not, ended quickly with the reflection that Goyle intended to throw it away anyway, on Malfoy's own order.

The next day...

That morning, the story of Snape's misfortune had acquired monumental proportions, and Harry caught quite a few amused glances thrown his way, even from his own House. In less than five minutes, he had lost almost 300 points, but had, apparently involuntarily, managed to put Snape completely out of order. Even the teachers weren't completely on Snape's side: he clearly saw McGonagall smiling at him, once, and Sirius went so far as congratulating him in the privacy of an unused classroom. The few Slytherins still arguing that he was a liability for the House saw their arguments reduced to nothing after the following Defence period.

"I have heard, from many reliable sources, that some teacher remove points unjustly given by others." Remus started. "While it is admirable, one can wonder about the significance of 'unjustly.' Did any of you find last week's presentation useless and the points given unjustly?" he asked.

Malfoy was in the infirmary, and no one else dared raise a hand.

"Very well." the werewolf continued. "Since a particular teacher seems to have gone overboard against the points I rewarded Mister Anderson with, I will rectify this now."

Looking at Harry, he said. "Mister Anderson, take back the 100 points for Slytherin I gave you for last week's presentation. Since the other teacher saw fit to apply an interest to points, take another 100. Do you agree to continue last week's speech today?"

Harry nodded, too stunned to do otherwise.

"That will be another 100 points, then." Remus finished, before looking at him intently. While the boy went to the board, he mentally sent something else. 'I should add 100 more points for making us laugh so much, but I'm not sure how the other students would take it.'

Harry snorted, before flashing a smile at his teachers. Straightening up, he continued to talk about swords and spells for half an hour – while still refraining from divulging too much of his actual skill and powers – and he discovered that, in fact, he liked sharing his ideas in that way. Afterwards, he thought about what Remus had said the previous week and came to the conclusion that teaching could be a nice and interesting job.

As usual when Snape was "out of order", Dumbledore replaced him. The Potion classroom soon acquired a lightened atmosphere. Harry couldn't benefit from it, though, because he didn't have Potion before Wednesday the next week, and the scales around Snape's mouth had started to recede already. That didn't prevent Harry from hiding under Malfoy's infirmary bed at random times and whisper Parseltongue to him.

Everything he said was met by a nod from the blond boy, who was thinking it was Snape talking. Of course, Harry had taken care to Silence the boy's curtains, and nothing filtered out of it. Harry once wondered why he had to hide: since he could Apparate only a body part in or out of the gaseous reality, he reflected that he could do so with his mouth as well.

That Friday morning, Ginny knew she would thank Harry profusely as soon as the double Potion class was finished.

The rumour mill had worked overtime about the real reasons behind Snape's current state, but had calmed a bit when even Malfoy told his

squad that he mustn't have hung his bag properly – something that had been suggested by Harry while he was speaking to the blond in Parseltongue. Harry's closest friends knew about the truth, though, and that had brought a round of hysterical laughter in the inter-house study room. Thank Merlin for small favours, the table was Silenced, and the laughter hadn't drawn attention to them.

However, the still fiery haired girl didn't see Harry at all during lunch. She went to her twin brothers once more, but they didn't see any dot labelled Kentaro Anderson or Harry Potter on the Marauders' map. Not knowing everything about Harry, they dismissed the one dot labelled Henry Evans in the Headmaster's office. Earlier that morning...

Harry didn't have many visions from Voldemort anymore, but he woke up that Friday with a strange feeling of anticipation. 'That couldn't be Charms,' he thought, and it wasn't. Despite his good grades in the subject, he wasn't usually in his current excited state. He felt as if he was expecting something... big.

At the end of the Charms period, he couldn't take it anymore and hid in his curtained bedroom for an introspection session – after all, all the second years had a free period before lunch, so, who cared?

What he found out didn't ease him in the least. The feeling came from the stone prison around the channel to Voldemort's mind.

Harry peeked at the vision outlet, but nothing came out of it. Not liking it at all, he braced himself and entered the prison itself. Ever so slowly so as not to raise suspicion, he went into the tunnel-like magical link, helped by the waves of eagerness coming from the evil man, and arrived on the outskirts of Voldemort's mind. He knew the man was still too powerful in Occlumency for him to attack or try something there. He could do something else, though.

After grasping the location from where his mind was, Harry returned to his own body and tried to Apparate there. It was an empty apartment in London, and it had been appropriately enlarged to host a Death Eater meeting. Harry couldn't enter it, though. Upon arriving to the place at high speed, he found himself stopped by a wobbly field

in the gaseous reality, the same kind than the one he had encountered when chasing his three attackers a month ago.

Since then, though, he had read a few books – and Hermione had read even more books – and he knew that customized anti-Apparation fields were often keyed to people's identity. Since it was Voldemort, he guessed that a Death Eater meeting was underway and supposed that people like Malfoy could enter it. Harry quickly assumed a fake identity with the blond boy's name before prodding at the field. To his surprise – and joy – it opened, and he pressed forward.

“...know what to do? Perfect. Go, now.” Voldemort was saying, and the Dark Lord Apparated away. As the Death Eaters were disappearing as well, Harry cursed his slowness: he didn't know their target. However, he noticed two familiar shapes lagging behind, although they were larger than he was used to: Crabbe and Goyle senior. Just as they were slowly focusing all their limited magical power into Apparating, he entered Crabbe's mind and extracted a memory of the whole meeting. And he gasped.

He didn't even have enough time to warn Dumbledore or anyone! Unless...

He allowed himself half a second of concentration to send a short mental message to Tracey, before following the Death Eaters, modifying his physical appearance on the way. As he was arriving on his target, he also fished out his katana and Ravenclaw's ring from his locket, as well as the magical glasses that he had felt near the ring. He then equipped everything before Apparating in.

Tracey Davis was in the inter-house study room with several members of the SAGES group, when she felt the faint irruption in her thoughts. Despite being faint, she knew the mental signature associated to it, and stood suddenly, looking around wildly. Seeing the other's interrogative gazes, she motioned to Hermione and Ron to come with her on another table nearby.

“What is it?” Hermione asked.

“Harry called.” she answered. “He’s with... Voldemort.”

“WHAT?” yelled Ron, but the two others didn’t care if he yelled or not. After all, the tables were Silenced.

“It’s as I said. He told me to send a particular message to Dumbledore.” she said, before repeating said message.

Her two friends looked at her with wide eyes for a few seconds of pause, and she started to panic. “How can we do that? I mean... the Headmaster is always in his office, and we don’t have the password, and...”

“He is teaching Potions, now.” Ron butted in. “I know because Ginny was gushing about it at breakfast. Anything but Snape, she was saying – and I wholeheartedly agree.”

“So, we can go there, and... what do we say?” asked Tracey. “He will never believe us!”

Hermione was silent, and Ron noticed it.

“Hermione?” the redhead asked. “I know you; you have something on your mind.”

The Ravenclaw nodded, before addressing Tracey. “Between the three of us, you’re the best at Transfiguration, and you already know the shape of Harry’s sword. Can you make a believable knife?”

Tracey looked up, startled, before nodding.

“Make one, then.” Hermione said, before taking a self-refilling quill and a piece of parchment from her robe pockets. “You don’t need to make the blade sharp, but I will need it to be pointy.”

The Slytherin nodded again. She then took a needle from her Transfiguration homework and concentrated on it. A couple of

minutes afterwards, she was wiping the sweat off her forehead, but a knife looking like Harry's tanto was on the table between them.

"Good!" exclaimed Hermione, grabbing it and hiding it from view. Thankfully, after their first seconds of wonder, the other SAGES had returned to their homework and nobody had noticed the knife. "Let's get moving, now." she said, standing up and grabbing her parchment as well. Unnoticed by Tracey and Ron, she had copied Harry's message on a loose piece of parchment, applying herself to disguise her writing.

Ron and Tracey knew the way to the Potion classroom, but they were surprised when Hermione, instead of descending the stairs to the dungeon, headed toward a seldom-used corridor.

"Where are you going?" Ron whispered urgently, grabbing her arm. "Dumbledore's downstairs!"

"I know!" she answered and shook her arm free. "I know a shortcut."

"A shortcut?" he asked, genuinely surprised. "Have you spied on the twins?"

"Who?" she asked. "Your brothers? Why?"

"Because... err... they know Hogwarts quite well?" he ventured.

"I'll have you know, Ron Weasley, that there are interesting books in the Library, should anyone want to read them. As far as I know, the one mentioning the passage we are going to take hadn't been borrowed in fifty years. And it dates from the previous century."

"Err, guys?" asked Tracey. "Would you stop arguing and go on?"

Hermione looked at her, and Ron frowned, biting back the retort he had been preparing. Tracey was right, though. If Harry's neck was on the line, they should hurry.

They stopped in front of a picture of a beautiful castle. Contrarily to most portraits in the castle, there wasn't anyone living in it – apparently.

“Passer au port!” Hermione said, and the two others looked at her inquiringly. “What?” she asked. “It’s French.”

They didn't answer, partly because they heard the whooshing sound of the portrait opening. Hermione threw them a pointed look and advanced. The others followed, and jumped in fright when the portrait closed behind them, plunging them in pitch black darkness.

“Feu de tout bois.” Hermione pronounced in the foreign language, and several torches flared to life, illuminating a beautiful room with... more doors. “Come on,” the Ravenclaw said, advancing toward one of them, “the Potion classroom is this way. Do you trust me?” she asked, her hand on the handle.

The other two nodded.

“I trust you too.” Hermione continued. “Stay here and hold the door open, please. Otherwise, it will close as soon as I pass through it.”

They acquiesced and approached, ready to do it.

Hermione opened the door slowly, and the two others noticed that it was leading in the Potion classroom's corridor. Judging by the corridor's configuration, said classroom was the door just beside them. Hermione drew the knife and the message from her pocket, and tiptoed to the door, onto which she stuck them, the knife holding the parchment in place. To be sure that she had been heard, she then banged on the door with her fist, before plunging in the French room's opening, and the door slammed shut soundlessly.

Knowing, from Harry, that the Headmaster had a way of knowing who was where in Hogwarts, she then hurriedly led the two others to the door they had taken initially and they left the rooms. “Marchand de sable.” Hermione said as the castle's painting was closing, and the last thing they noticed from the room was the torches going off. The

trio ran a bit more until they were in the corridor leading toward the study room they had left a few minutes ago, and they switched to an unhurried walk, their breathing slowly returning to normalcy. Several seconds earlier...

Upon hearing the banging sound door, the Headmaster yelled "Enter" but nobody came in. He then walked all the way to the door and opened it. The corridor was desert, and the old man sighed at the level the pranks had sunk to if students amused themselves only by knocking on classroom doors.

He closed the door...

...only to hear a clatter behind it. Opening it again, he noticed the knife and message on the ground. The knife reminded him of something and he quickly cast a detection spell onto it. The spell not giving indication that the knife or the message were cursed, he grabbed them both and looked at the knife intently. He had seen that artwork somewhere, but... where? He knew it had been important, though, and focused on the message. It was short, to the point, and, despite the different handwriting, had the same style than the messages he had received the previous year.

Death Eaters stealing the Crown Jewels right now. Voldemort needs them for a ritual. Help needed. Tower of London. – Jerry

He looked at his class. First years. He hoped it was the right decision. "Finish your Potions calmly, I'll send someone to replace me. Mistrs Harper and Creevey, you are in charge in the meantime."

He then exited the classroom and hurried towards his office, pocketing the knife and message in the way. Still walking briskly, he drew his wand out and touched its tip to his phoenix ring three times. Said ring was linked to the other rings detained by the members of the Order of the Phoenix, and the members wearing it felt the Headmaster's summon and its urgency. In the last yards to his office, Dumbledore clasped his Hogwarts medallion in his hand to check about Hogwarts' current population, but didn't notice anything unusual.

He didn't know that the three students who had warned him were just taking their seats in the study room. He also didn't know that, at the beginning of the year, Harry Potter had returned to Rowena Ravenclaw's study for a quick chat with Cassie, and had asked her not to hide him completely, only reporting him in his bed when he wasn't in Hogwarts or when he was assuming another identity.

There already were members of the Order gathered in his office, waiting for him. As he entered his office, panting, several others dribbled from the fireplace, completing their numbers.

Dumbledore spotted McGonagall. "You stay and run the school. I left the first years in Potions."

The stern Professor nodded and left.

The Headmaster then closed his Floo access, and looked at the assembled people grimly. "Death Eaters." he merely said, and they straightened up, drawing their wands. "Our target is the Tower of London. On three." Dumbledore finished, grabbing hold of the nearest shoulder. They repeated the move, making a long chain of human beings, something that helped get directions when Apparating. "One... Two... Three!"

And the room emptied. They hadn't time to wait for the ones that hadn't been able to join them on time, and those would find the hearth closed anyway.

A bit earlier, at their destination...

In the little room, Harry was fighting for his life. From the moment he had left the gaseous reality, he hadn't had time to think properly, only reacting as his swordsmanship teacher had taught him to. He had tried to do something else earlier, but his "Accio wands" hadn't worked for an unknown reason, and he knew that casting the Light spell with Ravenclaw's ring wouldn't be as effective as with Merlin's wand. He had either to continue reacting to the Death Eaters' relentless attacks, or use more specific attack spells, but it implied stopping reacting and it would endanger his life even more. As it was, the air was charged with magic and colourful beams were constantly

shot at him, while he jumped around the display containing the Crown of England's regalia, preventing the black-clad wizards from reaching it.

Thankfully, he had had the element of surprise, just as they had had it against the muggles, and there were at least as many Death Eaters agonizing in their blood around said display as they were muggle guards and tourists lying lifeless.

When the Death Eaters noticed that they were attacked from behind as well, they understood that the cavalry had arrived, and stopped attacking. A tall figure yelled an order and they all disappeared within seconds.

Harry felt the change in the air and stopped jumping around. He looked at Dumbledore intently.

"Albus Dumbledore."

"Henry Evans." answered the old man, recognizing the man from the Azkaban breakout.

"Got my message?" Harry asked, panting. "Jerry's been awfully busy."

Dumbledore nodded, surveying the carnage with a sad eye. The blood dripping from the man's sword reminded him of something, and he drew the knife from his pocket. Harry looked at it with a surprised expression, before it became thoughtful and then amused. It darkened immediately, though.

"Leave some men to protect the place and follow me with the others." he said gravely. "There's another place attacked."

"Where?" asked Dumbledore, while mentally choosing who would stay and who would come. Given the situation here, he didn't question the man's intelligence.

Harry looked at him, and brought a full memory to the forefront of his mind. "Windsor." he said, and Dumbledore nodded.

Henry Evans vanished.

The old man rounded his troops, quickly explaining their task. To a disgruntled Moody, who was going to lead the defending party, he told that there could be a repeat later, and to stay on guard. To Arthur Weasley, he gave the mission of calling Amelia Bones for her to send Aurors and Obliviators – He didn't send Kingsley Shacklebolt or Tonks because he knew he would need a bit of firepower on his side in Windsor. Grabbing each other so as not to lose anyone, the reduced group followed Dumbledore's lead and Apparated in the castle.

The day was November 20th, 1992, and it was 10:57am.

Harry followed the instructions Voldemort had given to his followers and found a trail of dead guards on the way, most of them slaughtered with Dark Curses. The castle was quite silent, and Harry's ears were still ringing from his previous battle. Running in the corridors, Harry quickly approached the first target: Brunswick Tower.

The few rooms in there were currently occupied by fifty masked wizards, twenty of which had just arrived from the Tower of London. Most of them were scouring the furniture there, as well as destroying the wood panelling, in search of something looking like a chalice – Voldemort hadn't been precise in his instructions, and Harry supposed that only the Dark Lord's closest followers actually knew what it looked like.

Two Death Eaters were guarding the tower's stairs, and they noticed Harry running toward them, his bloodied blade in hand. They both yelled the Killing Curse, but Harry seemed to blink out of existence before the green beams struck him. He reappeared behind them, and, in two swift strikes, ended their lives. It was kill-or-be-killed, and Harry knew that he would mourn his innocence later. He had been trained to survive and to kill, though, and his training had kicked in.

He magically tripped the first few Death Eaters descending the stairs and one of them impaled himself on his blade. Harry couldn't kill the

two other fallen ones, as several other Dark wizards were pouring from the upper rooms and were targeting him. He disappeared again, letting the dead man slide to the ground, and rematerialized behind the descending wizards, striking at two of them before vanishing again.

“ He’s using Apparation!” someone yelled just as Harry was reappearing downstairs, and someone else yelled an incantation which got lost in the numerous spells cast at that moment.

The anti-Apparation jinx took Harry by surprise, and he was suddenly hit with the brunt of a Cutting Curse and with rubble from a badly-aimed Explosion Curse. He retreated in the Chapel nearby and slammed the door shut, magically locking it on the way.

He reflected that, since the Cutting Curse had touched him, his shielding spell must have worn off during the fight for the Crown Jewels. After healing himself, he quickly reapplied the charm on himself and his sword, and assessed his options.

He didn’t have more than a few seconds, though, as spells blasted the door away. Harry saw splinters heading his way, and his thought-controlled levitation powers kicked in as well, blocking the wood pieces in a 1-yard sphere around him. Harry started to make the splinters float around, knowing that he would be a much more difficult target with the obstacles in the way.

Through the blasted door, he noticed that another magical battle was going on at the tower’s other entrance, and, knowing that Dumbledore had arrived, he focused on the fight again.

After a brief exchange of spells – meaning that ten spells were thrown at him and were blocked by splinters or reflected by Harry’s shield or sword, and that Harry was merely casting wide but weak Cutting Curses to prevent more than that number of beams to reach him.

The curses thrown at him stopped, though, when someone yelled. “Stop it, worms! He’s mine!”

A large man stepped over the debris and looked at Harry before removing his hooded cape. Harry didn't even have to access his memories or the man's to find out about his identity.

"I'm Rastaban Lestrangle," the man said haughtily. "Who am I going to slice in two?"

"Not me." Harry answered cheekily. "But I'm known as Henry Evans, if that was the goal of your question."

The other man nodded, before drawing a large sword from a scabbard on his back

'Scabbards. Interesting. I wonder if...' Harry thought, before being forced to evade the sword's greater range when the man swung it at him. While evading the man's thrusts, Harry re-applied his shielding spell again before dropping the splinters. He didn't want to be hit from behind by the other Death Eaters and knew that he would need all his concentration, as the man seemed to be an expert.

And it was true. Rastaban Lestrangle was one of the best swordsmen bred in England. While defending himself and protecting his mind, he even succeeded in grazing Harry a few times. The deepest wound was even inflicted when the man suddenly changed his leading hand in the middle of a strike, taking Harry by surprise. The sword made a deep gash in Harry's calve, and he felt a stinging sensation emanating from the wound. Forgoing attack, he focusing on defence and on his Metamorphmagus powers to push whatever poison the man had used out of his system. It took him quite a while, though, and he couldn't heal the injury at the same time. Despite feeling the blood soaking his leg, he then returned to the fight itself.

Seeing that his poison wasn't having the usual effect, Rastaban pressed his attacks. The two men sparred unsuccessfully for a few minutes, none of them having a clear advantage. However, Harry almost discerned a pattern in which he could graft himself. He was ready to do so when people walked in the Chapel, visibly coming from the crypt downstairs.

“We have it!” a man yelled, brandishing a large cup made of rough wood. He was looking so much like Rastaban Lestrage that he must have been no other than his brother Rodolphus. “Who put that anti-App...” he trailed off, noticing that there was something underway. Because of his distraction, the chalice got ripped from his hands when a powerful and highly focused Accio spell struck it, and the cup flew through the doors, and over the Death Eaters’ heads, into Dumbledore’s hands. Harry smiled, but his smile faltered when Rodolphus tried to jump after the cup only to be pushed away by a barrage of spells coming from the Order of the Phoenix. At around the same moment, the Aurors arrived around Dumbledore and, their firepower increased, the Light side began to push the opposition away from the door.

The reason for Harry’s smile faltering wasn’t Rodolphus jumping away, or the Aurors’ appearance. In fact, he was rather oblivious to the latter because of the sight in front of him. A man had been hidden behind Rodolphus Lestrage, only to be revealed when the man had lunged after the flying cup.

Peter Pettigrew.

‘Shit!’ he exclaimed internally. ‘The rat isn’t dead?’

Pettigrew wasn’t dead, apparently, but it was going to be Harry’s last preoccupation because Rastaban hooked his own sword under his katana and yanked his weapon upwards, disarming him in the process. Harry’s sword was thrown upwards so forcefully that it stuck itself in the ceiling’s wooden panelling with a sharp sound.

Seeing his opponent’s smug look and his sword out of reach, Harry panicked for a few seconds. He even tried escaping through the gaseous reality, before being remembered of the anti-Apparation field still in place. ‘If only I had my other weapons easily accessible.’ he cursed, and vowed to wear said weapons when engaging in a later fight – if he ever survived this one.

In the meantime, Pettigrew had disappeared – surely as a rat, he thought.

Harry cursed, and cursed again, while jumping and rolling on the ground to evade his opponent's strikes. If only his sword wasn't stuck that high, he would be able to grab it from the ground and defend himself.

Grab it...

Harry's eyes lit up at a memory of one of his talks with Goken. He stopped rolling around and focused on his katana, his hand outstretched. Rastaban, ten yards before him, scowled at his suddenly immobile shape.

"What are you intending to do?" he asked and, not waiting for a result, he threw his sword forward like a javelin.

However, Harry's katana was swifter and it disappeared from its high place only to reappear in Harry's hand. The boy, whose shape was still an auburn-haired man, rolled forward a couple of times to evade the incoming blade. Harry then took advantage of his speed to jump at Rastaban, his legs propelling him four feet in the air. A powerful slice later, the man's head was falling from his shoulders.

"NOOOOOOOO!" another man yelled. Rodolphus, Harry thought, and he could swear that a feminine voice was yelling as well, from farther in Brunswick Tower. The man started to cast spell after spell at him, quickly joined by a woman, and Harry parried them with his sword – the reflective shield still in place from earlier. Some of them were returned to the Death Eaters crowd, but even Harry couldn't maintain that level of control all the time, and a few spells went haywire. Among them, two Cutting curses hit the tapestries, five Explosion curses hit the windows and oak panelling, and no less than seven Incendio spells struck the rubble, one of these even leaving through a broken window.

Seeing that the Light side was stronger than envisioned, the Death Eater who had put up the anti-Apparation field removed it, and the Dark Wizards disappeared one after the other. Seeing their friends flee, the angry couple disappeared as well. Straightening his glasses,

Harry looked around and noticed the fires starting around him. He started putting them down, until he saw several people arrive, among whom a familiar large dog was sniffing the air for residual traces of people hiding around. The Aurors took over the task of putting the magical fires out, and Harry stared at Sirius.

He didn't see him as a dog, though. He saw him as a dog with a human-sized image of Sirius imbedded in it. He shook his head, and the move reminded him of his glasses. He removed the magical lenses and the fake image disappeared, leaving a dog looking at him with an enquiring expression.

Harry thought about it. When Pettigrew had disappeared, a tad earlier, he had thought that it was through the man's Animagus powers because the anti-Apparation field had been up. He hadn't seen an image in the like of Sirius', though, and since he had had the glasses on, it meant that the man hadn't actually left the room, possibly returning to the Chapel's basement. While the other wizards searched around the room for traces of Dark wizards, he looked at the dog intently.

"Do you smell a rat?" he asked, and Sirius' ears perked up. He smelled around and headed towards the crypt's entrance, followed by Remus and Harry. The boy, being wounded at the leg, supported himself by using his katana as a cane.

However, the black dog stopped following the trail in the middle of the stairs, and transformed back into his human self – the Aurors knew about him, and he had registered to the Ministry as an Animagus, so it wasn't a problem.

"The little devil-" he sneezed mightily. "-put some-" another sneeze. "-pepper." he finished, and held his nose to avoid sneezing. It worked for a second, before he went into a sneezing fit and was forced to walk back upstairs. Dumbledore saw him exit the stairs and headed there himself, following Remus.

The werewolf motioned for Dumbledore to keep silent, though: Harry had advanced further down, his senses in full alert. He noticed

several ornamented tombs there, several of them having been damaged, opened, or squarely destroyed by the Dark Wizards. Smiling, he found out that he hadn't needed to be a Legilimens to spot Pettigrew, as the magical glasses revealed his potbellied image crouching in fright behind a broken tomb.

His smile faltered, though, when the image acquired substance before disappearing in the tell-tale popping sound of Apparation.

'Hogwarts. Later.' he sent to Remus, just as he disappeared as well.

The werewolf nodded absently, before turning towards Dumbledore.

"What are you doing downstairs?" asked the old man.

"Evans was chasing Wormtail," Remus answered, the rat's name uttered in disgust, "and both disappeared. I hope he'll find him."

Dumbledore nodded. "As I do." he said, as both of them mounted the stairs again. Remus noticed that the Order members had disappeared already, and only a few Aurors remained. "I have requested a meeting with today's members in fifteen minutes in my office." the Headmaster whispered, and the werewolf acquiesced absently. The older man nodded as well, before disappearing.

Remus stayed for several seconds, looking at the damaged room, before vanishing too.

The clocks of the castle indicated 11:30am, but nobody cared. One minute later, the Aurors filed out as well. Two minutes later, a mound of glowing embers ignited again. Three minutes later, the pile of rubble nearby, containing highly inflammable remains of tapestries and wood panelling, caught fire as well.

To be continued in next chapter: Around the Fireplace...

Alas, the death toll a-built,
Along with our hero's guilt.
He hadn't realized it, yet,

And friends will make his eyes wet.

Chapter 21 – Around the Fireplace

posted November 5th, 2005

11:33am, that November 20th, 1992.

Near London, in the watch-room of the Windsor Castle fire brigade, Chief Fire Office Marshall Smith was reading his favourite newspapers when a clicking sound grabbed his attention, and he looked up. On the grid map showing the castle, a light was flashing, indicating a fire near Brunswick Tower. Under the man's horrified gaze, other lights lit up around that one, indicating that the fire was spreading quickly. Smith followed the procedure, activating the high-pitched alarms and alerting the county firemen, before leading his men to the place to do the work that had been theirs since the fire protection and fighting had been relegated to the county the year before: save what was salvageable. In mere minutes, a large part of the State Apartments was burning, and it was the start of the largest and fiercest fire seen in England since World War II.

Some would say that it was the fiercest of the fires England had witnessed, ever: more than a million gallons of water would be needed to overcome the fire completely, 15 hours after its start. The official investigation wouldn't find anything more incriminating than a spotlight igniting a curtain, and some would comment on it, saying that it was unnatural, and preaching for sinners to repent because the end of the world was near.

Strangely, the news wouldn't reach the ears of the magical world until much later and, not seeing the link, no one would see fit to give the Aurors on duty that day the slightest reprimand. Well, one person was going to see the link, but that person wasn't in the proper position to scold the Law Enforcement personnel. Earlier, in the Chapel's crypt...

Peter Pettigrew was afraid.

He had never been one for the violence in the world, especially when directed against his egocentric person. He largely preferred sticking with the winning party as soon as said party was clearly identified. He

had had a good choice in characters when he had chosen the Black-Potter duo since his first ride to Hogwarts, and had even convinced the Sorting Hat that he wanted to be put in Gryffindor, not Slytherin. Afterwards, the werewolf had been included too, and the four of them had started to rampage the school with pranks.

Even if he wasn't doing much for the pranks except providing alibis, or going through small openings later on, he had been included in the famous team of pranksters. Even if he disliked the ongoing war underlying the Gryffindor-Slytherin conflict, his side seemed to have always won. That had been the best seven years of his life.

And then, James Potter had married Lily Evans, breaking the foursome. Sure, the Marauders had been seeing each other afterwards, but on much rarer occasions than the everyday school schedule. Sirius and James had also been accepted into the Auror training program, and he hadn't been skilled enough to follow. And Remus... well, as werewolves couldn't legally work, Remus had gone where graduated werewolves went, and Peter hadn't cared. All that had been important, at that time, was his little person and how his friends had "abandoned" him.

One night of depression, he had found an attentive ear in a barman in Knockturn Alley, and had quickly been introduced to the man that was going to brand him, to mark him for a life of sorrow. At the beginning, Voldemort had seemed attentive and compassionate to his problems, and hadn't asked much in exchange. That ratio had changed quickly, until the night when the Potters got killed. Sirius, being the only other choice for Secret Keeper, had known that he had betrayed his friends, and he had exposed him. After wriggling his way out of his friend's wrath, he had fled and hid since then, assuming his rat shape most of the time.

That's why his rat senses were so attuned to danger. That's why he had heard the approaching man even before said man had put a foot out of the stairwell. But he couldn't very well escape, could he? After all, the Animagus couldn't Apparate when in his animal shape, as wizards usually used their wands to Apparate.

That got him thinking. Since the man was there, it meant that the Death Eaters had either left, been killed, or taken prisoner. Which implied that the anti-Apparation ward had disappeared. With the ease of a practised transformation, Peter Pettigrew morphed back into his human shape and, his wand still in his hand from earlier, he Apparated out.

He arrived in his shabby apartment in the outskirts of London, and sat on his bed. It wasn't exactly his apartment and his bed, but the owner had been executed by Voldemort some time ago, and Pettigrew had used it in this way since then.

A sense of impending danger made his hair stick in the back of his neck, and he plunged under the bed, switching into his rat for on the way – otherwise, he'd be hard-pressed to pass the 2-inch high aperture.

"Peter Pettigrew." he voice said, and the rat chanced a look out. When he noticed that the man was looking right at him, he recoiled in the darkness and headed for the rat hole in the wall. Once in the corridor, he transformed back into himself, and Apparated out. He was sure that he heard an exasperated sigh as he left.

Pettigrew hadn't known where to go exactly, but a place had been a cosy home for him for several years, and he unconsciously headed there. The Burrow was empty, but he suspected that the Weasley elders would be home soon, and transformed into a rat.

And the same sigh was heard behind him. "Don't you know when it's time to stop?" the voice said.

The rat turned around, and what he saw made him gasp, before returning to his normal self. In front of him stood a living and miniature version of James Potter. James Potter at 12, in fact. James Potter when the world had been turning perfectly well around him. James Potter who... just Accio'ed his wand?

“James! I’m sorry! I didn’t want to! I swear!” he said, grovelling being something he had specialized himself into. However, it was the wrong person to grovel to.

“Nobody calls me James.” the boy said. “Even if names have no meaning, people tend to use the other’s first names when they are friends.”

The grovelling man looked up, and noticed something... different. It wasn’t James. It wasn’t James at all! And the scar, on the forehead. It was...

The boy sighed again. A sigh of someone used to see too much in too short a time. “However, I don’t think we should think to each other as friends, Pettigrew. With your voluntary help in murdering my parents, and all this sort of things.”

“Ha... Har... Harry?” the man asked, struggling to keep his voice even. “Please, help me, Harry, I have been pursued by a contract killer, and-”

“No.”

“-and... err... what?”

“I don’t need a contract to kill you.” Harry said, his voice suddenly cold as winter in the arctic.

They stayed on front of each other, and Pettigrew noticed a few things that had escaped his perception yet, and others which seemed to happen just now. The boy in front of him was taller, much taller than a regular 12 year old kid. He had glasses, the same than the man who went after him earlier. And he held something behind his back...

Harry smirked, and revealed the full length of his bloodied blade to the shell-shocked Animagus. Pettigrew had been on the verge of doing it earlier, but the ominous blade broke his last restraints: he soiled himself.

Harry frowned at the smell, before grasping the man and Apparating out. No need to deteriorate the Weasleys' interior, he thought.

Appearing like Harry Potter was dangerous, but it had been fun, and he finished reshaping himself as Henry Evans. This done, he finished healing himself and, after wiping his blade on his robes, he used the Cleaning charm on himself, thus removing the other stains from the battle. He then took care of Pettigrew's mind, selectively erasing the man's last memories. He also reflected about the man's Animagus powers. After weighing his options, he decided to disconnect the man's memory block related to his Animagus power from his other memories, making it unreachable. In case a powerful Legilimens decided to reconnect it, Harry went into the depths of said memory and changed the transformation.

Pettigrew – and the person "healing" him – would have a surprise the next time he would transform. If he ever did, in fact. Harry seriously hoped that the man would be put away by the Ministry.

After that bit of mind surgery, Harry dragged the glassy-eyed man towards Hogwarts, and Apparated in outside of the wards, next to Hagrid's hut.

Just as he was climbing the steps towards the Entrance Hall, dragging a reluctant Pettigrew by the collar, he felt Remus arriving behind him and stopped. The werewolf had Apparated in the not-Shrieking-anymore Shack and had exited the trapdoor hidden behind the Whomping Willow. Upon recognizing Pettigrew, Remus' face hardened, but a look at the man's soiled pants brought an amused glance to his eyes. He looked at Harry.

‘You fine?’ he asked mentally.

‘Yeah.’ answered Harry. ‘Tired.’

‘I can understand that. Thanks for everything you did.’

‘Alright, alright.’ Harry answered, not really in the mood for explaining why he thought it was his responsibility to do so – especially as it involved a saying from a muggle superhero in a comic strip: "With great powers come great responsibilities." He doubted Remus would have understood the "comics" part of it.

They walked some more in silence, before reaching the infamous gargoyles.

‘I just remembered something.’ Harry suddenly said to Remus. ‘The Aurors cleaned up, right?’

‘Err... I guess they did.’ the man answered. ‘They were still working when I left, and I was the last of our little group.’

‘Good.’ Harry said, nodding. ‘I would hate to see that castle in fire because someone forgot to do his job.’

The werewolf uttered the password and, a few seconds later, the three of them entered the cluttered and crowded office and a hush fell on the room.

The magical clock on the mantelpiece showed 11:44am, but nobody knew about the magical fire raging several hundred leagues to the south.

After several long seconds of silence, mixed reaction came from the assembled crowd. Most of them were split between surprise upon witnessing the trio at the door and indignation upon seeing the rat Animagus. Whispers of “It’s Pettigrew!” echoed in the room until a not-so-discreet cough interrupted them.

Dumbledore stood and addressed them. “Please, everybody. Let’s welcome these two gentlemen and hear them out. I’m sure that Mister Evans’ story will be very interesting. But before... Stupefy.” he said, aiming at Pettigrew, who slumped forward.

‘Interesting spell.’ Harry thought, in the privacy of his own mind. ‘I should memorize it for later.’

Meanwhile, the fallen man was quickly intercepted, bound, and stowed in a far corner by a zealous Alastor Moody – having returned from securing the Crown Jewels area with a team of muggle-dressed Aurors. After noticing the fetid smell, the scarred Auror Cleaned the rat Animagus as well, before returning to the table with a smirk.

“Thank you, Mister Dumbledore.” Harry answered the Headmaster, before turning to Moody. “And thank you for taking charge of the rat. I still wonder how he escaped his crimes alive.” he said, returning his gaze to the headmaster, who frowned, having had the same thought. “Whatever the case, here is the wand he used.” he said, taking said wand from his pocket and tossing it at Moody.

They spoke for the next hour, Harry starting by explaining that he had been warned of the attack by Jerry Homest, mere seconds before it started. However, much to the others’ discomfort, he couldn’t say how the "other" man had had any idea of the attack at all. Harry also explained how the two target locations had been attacked, and how he had acted to prevent the Death Eaters to reach their goal.

When he left afterwards, Moody recapped everyone’s thoughts with one comment. “He’d make a mighty fine addition to the Order.” Harry left the Headmaster’s office with a nagging thought in his mind. It started like a faint inkling which he put aside, but it continued through his hurried meal – grabbed in the castle’s kitchen again – and through the afternoon’s Herbology period. As they were managing carnivorous plants, he didn’t have the luxury of having time to reflect about it.

Unfortunately, his close friends ambushed him after Herbology and demanded an explanation about his disappearance, and he was sidetracked enough to forget about his anxious state. In the study room, he spent nearly an hour telling them the day’s morning and the subsequent attack, and tried to ignore their shocked expressions. Just as he finished the retelling of the Tower of London attack, a stray thought hit him, and he voiced his question.

“I still wonder how they kept their wands when I Accio’ed them.”

Ron frowned. "I remember something my parents discussed about, once. Mum was complaining about the price of anti-Summoning wand holsters and dad told her that she could make them and he would ask someone to charm them."

"And there are surely spells that one can use to prevent unwanted Summoning of wands." Hermione stated.

"Especially since I did that with Malfoy's group when they attacked Diagon Alley." Harry mused. "They must be more prepared, now." he said, frowning.

After a short pause, he looked at them with a smile. "I saw the knife you made." he said, and Tracey blushed, thus revealing she had done it. Noticing it, Harry congratulated her and asked about how they succeeded in warning Dumbledore unnoticed.

That was Hermione's turn to blush, and the others looked at her expectantly. It was her story to tell and neither Ron nor Tracey would take undue credit from it. After telling how she stuck the knife in the Potion classroom's door, she fell silent but was prodded by the others. With a sigh, she continued.

"I read a century-old book." she started slowly, but soon acquired her cruising speed again. "It was located next to the Quidditch reports I have been looking through for strategies. As I finished those, I read it, and it was about an old tournament, dating seven centuries in the past. I didn't see anything about it elsewhere, though."

"A tournament? About what?" asked Harry.

"I don't know, since it seemed to be made of different trials each time. The goal was to test students' abilities in more practical environment than sitting exams. And there was a reward attached to it." She frowned suddenly. "It seems that many of the contenders died, though. Perhaps that's why we didn't hear about it anymore."

“And what is the link-” Harry enquired, but he was quickly interrupted.

Hermione in her lecture mode was like a steamroller, and almost nothing could stand in her way. “That tournament was called the Triwizard Tournament because it brought forth champions from the three largest wizarding schools of Europe: Hogwarts, Durmstrang, and Beauxbatons. The tournament was held in one of the three schools, with delegations of the two others spending a year there. The book I read was an accounting log of the tournament of 100 years ago, hosted in Hogwarts, and it gave the location of the living quarters for Durmstrang and Beauxbatons.”

“That’s why the passwords were in French!” whispered Ron, impressed by the bushy-haired witch.

“Yes.” she answered, and looked at him pointedly. “If that’s not the proof that there are interesting things in Libraries, what is?”

“You seemed to speak very well, though.” Tracey noticed. “Where did you learn? And what was their meaning?”

“My parents put me in a school where the Principal pushed for a well-rounded education. I learnt French among the subjects taught there. As to what it means... “Marchand de sable” means Sandman; “Passer au port” means to pass at the harbour – and is, incidentally, the origin of the word “passport.” She looked at them excitedly, wanting to launch a discussion about etymology, but seeing that Ron wasn’t even understanding the meaning of her last word, she stopped her sentence before it even started.

“And the last one?” asked Tracey. “To light the torches?”

“Oh, yes, I almost forgot. “Feu de tout bois” means that one can make a fire with any sort of wood.”

Harry had been opening his mouth, a question on the tip of his tongue. He stopped, though, as the nagging feeling crystallized and came back full force. Paling, he recoiled from the strength of it and,

understanding its meaning, he stood up suddenly, his chair falling on the floor.

“Uh... guys... I'll be back later. I just forgot... something.” he said, before running out of the room under their surprised gazes.

It was already five in the afternoon when he arrived, as Henry Evans, on the battle site. As he was trying to Apparate, he looked around first and noticed the unnatural state of the gaseous reality around him. It was still grey, but there were swirling objects that reminded him of... flames.

Still in the gaseous reality, he exiting the building and noticed the forty-or-so fire trucks parked around the castle, and the firemen swarming around. Appearing behind one of the trucks, he chanced a look at the castle and noticed that the fire was still raging despite the downpour the firemen were throwing at it. ‘Must be magical fire.’ he thought, and resolved to help.

He grabbed and donned one of the spare garbs from the truck's reserve, and joined the 200-or-so firemen around the building. The heat was really intense, though, and he couldn't approach the inferno sufficiently to cast a Finite Incantatem on it – and spells cast in the gaseous reality couldn't affect the tangible one.

He was thus forced to assist the firemen to the best of his abilities, as he could only approach the fire when it had receded enough from the wall he was facing. He suspected that it was at the expense of other rooms, but he now had a clear shot, and, aiming Ravenclaw's ring, he dispelled whatever magic was in the nearby fire. Like a wounded animal, the fire recoiled from the attack, before lunging back viciously. It couldn't ignite the drenched – and already-charred – wall, though, and retreated to the tower where it had started.

By 6:30pm, the fire "animal" had retreated in Brunswick Tower and it would be noted by the muggles that 50-foot high flames engulfed that part of the building while Harry was fighting the magic in the fire.

When Harry felt that said magic had gone away, one hour afterwards, he fell on his knees, exhausted. He had spent two hours in zones

where smoke was at its thickest, and had problems breathing. He was promptly taken away by a couple of firemen and brought to the tent that had been erected there for medical emergencies. There were only a couple of people there, suffering from the smoke like him.

As soon as he was given oxygen, though, Harry felt better and was ready to stand. The doctor managing the place, a stern man with a goatee, tried to prevent his move. He relented a few seconds later, though, when several new patients were hauled inside by a large group of firemen. Apparently, the wounded men had suffered from a wall collapsing on them and were all barely alive.

The doctor directed the firemen around, putting most of the wounded on beds, the less hurt being relegated to sit or lie on the grassy ground. Harry looked around in shock, standing next to a newly-occupied bed, his oxygen bottle still covering his mouth. His shocked state was interrupted when the fireman lying on the bed he had just vacated took a firm hold of his slackened hand.

“Help-” the man started, before trying to choke unsuccessfully. Harry looked up but the doctor was already trying to reanimate another patient. Remembering James, and all the others he had had to heal, Harry took a last intake of breath from the oxygen bottle before concentrating on the man’s state. He quickly found that the man had several cracked bones, a large part of charred skin, and he had inhaled smoke. Harry started by placing his oxygen mask onto the man’s face before focussing on the broken ribcage, as he couldn’t work on it if it was in pieces. In order to do so without disturbing the other splintered bones, he levitated the man an inch from the table. Once the ribs were mended, Harry focused on the pierced and clogged lungs, and succeeded in bringing one in full order before the man awakened, coughing violently. Harry took care of the second lung before releasing the levitation charm slowly. The man winced, but Harry knew he would live, and that others needed more immediate attention. Looking up, he noticed that the doctor was eyeing him warily.

“What were you doing?” the man asked.

“Nothing.”

“I saw you holding him up and...”

“I said nothing.” Harry said forcefully. “Who is in the worst state?” he asked.

The doctor mutely nodded toward the man resting behind him and Harry walked there, feeling that it was his duty to heal these firemen as well as it had been his duty to help dousing the fire. After all, the fire must have started because of him, somehow. He had also vowed, at some point, that he would use a good part of his fortune to help funding the reconstruction.

Once he reached the wounded man, he repeated the previous actions, taking care of the ribs and lungs first. Like the previous one, the man coughed for a few seconds until his lungs were properly healed. He also suffered from an internal haemorrhage and Harry took a few more seconds to heal the deadly state before turning to the stunned doctor.

“Next?”

One by one, Harry healed the seven mortally wounded firemen, and had started mending their bones and healing their skin when a couple ambulances arrived on the site. Harry paused his healing and suddenly noticed that he wasn't feeling well. Not at all. The mortally wounded men had been first in his mind and, while he had been helping them, Harry hadn't taken a second for himself. He tried to breathe deeply, but found that he couldn't, and coughed in his hand instead.

He glanced at the doctor, showing the blood in his hand, and his legs gave way, sending him crashing on the ground. The doctor, helped by the ambulance nurses, put him in a stretcher where, seconds before, a man had been on the verge of dying. While the nurse was pushing it toward the ambulances, the doctor put another oxygen bottle on Harry's face.

In a last effort, as the ambulance door slammed shut, Harry brought his Metamorphmagus powers up and half-healed his lungs before falling into unconsciousness.

The Great Hall of Hogwarts, at noon, the next day...

Sirius Black was quite worried.

Remus Lupin was quite worried.

But it wasn't for the same reason.

Sirius was worried because his hands had disappeared, only to be replaced with dog paws. To say the truth, he wasn't the only one, as most of the students and staff members also had their hands reshaped into paws of seemingly random animal. When Sirius looked around, though, his gaze caught the low-five the Weasley twins did. These two redheads belonged to the few people untouched by the prank, as were a few teachers. Sirius started to pray that Snape was touched too, before remembering that the greasy-haired and scaly-faced Potion teacher was still recovering, although he had moved to his own quarters. While looking around, Sirius noticed that Remus still had his human hands and was inspecting his full glass with a frown.

‘That must have been in the drinks.’ Sirius mused. ‘All those untouched mustn't have drunk.’ He looked toward the Slytherin table, and noticed that Draco Malfoy was not only displaying white paws of an unknown – albeit small – animal, but the blond boy was also complaining loudly about his pumpkin juice-drenched robes. ‘The twins must have done it just as he was drinking. Were they waiting for that?’ At that moment, Sirius' gaze caught Remus' worried look towards the Slytherins.

“What is it, Moony?” he asked.

Remus didn't answer, and Sirius repeated the question.

“I don’t know.” the healed werewolf whispered. “I have a bad feeling... Tiger’s not there.”

Sirius understood that his friend was speaking about Harry through the nickname they had chosen for him. He raked his eyes through the Slytherin table, but couldn’t find Harry either. “What do you suggest?” he asked likewise.

“Let’s wait for the meal to end and ask his friends.” Remus said, with a quick glance toward where Dumbledore was contemplating his fingerless and rock-hard paws – which closely resembled an old sea turtle’s. The old man didn’t seem to have heard anything about their exchange.

As usual, the day ended with people scattered in their common rooms or, in certain cases, in the inter-House common rooms. Remus and Sirius knew of a group of people there, and entered the room the students had dubbed "Games Parlour." They approached the large group of Exploding Snap players and a few of them froze, never having seen teachers in that room before. Naturally, the deck exploded and Ron Weasley and Seamus Finnigan found themselves covered in soot. Seamus was particularly disgruntled because he had been winning the four previous rounds of Exploding Snap without problem – something quite rare, Hermione had informed them all – and he had been intending to break the record when he had had the surprise of noticing the two teachers.

“Miss Granger, we know that you lead the SAGES, and we have a proposal for you.” Remus said.

“It’s about a tutoring session for tactical patterns in Defence Against the Dark Arts.” Sirius said, and Remus refrained from laughing outright. Sirius’ lie, though, seemed to make the students react quicker.

“Can we use the study room?” the former werewolf asked. “It won’t be long, I think. And Mister Weasley can come, too, as well as Miss Weasley and Miss Davis. If you wish, that is.”

Hermione frowned. Had the teachers asked for her, Ron and Tracey, she would have believed Sirius' words, but... Ginny? Mentally listing the common points of the people summoned, she quickly understood what it could be about and paled.

The addressed students agreed, though, and the little group left the games parlour to head to the study room nearby. Once they were all seated in the Silenced zone, Remus spoke. Bluntly.

"Harry told us about him and about you. I haven't seen him since yesterday evening. Do you know where he is?"

"Harry?" asked Hermione in a small voice. While the others began to understand and looked at the two teachers with flabbergasted expressions, she knew who they were talking about. She wanted a confirmation, though. "Harry who?"

Remus nodded. That girl was certainly clever. He leaned forward and whispered "Harry Potter" before sitting back. "Padfoot and I call him Tiger, though. It wouldn't do to for us ex-Gryffindors to speak fondly of a Slytherin." he said, before registering Hermione's frown. "Sorry," he started, "but it's just the way it was when we were students, and some people wouldn't understand if we change our behaviour now."

The children looked at their two teachers with their mouths still gaping. "You were students here?" asked Ginny in a small voice.

The two of them nodded.

"Padfoot?" she asked even more timidly. She had intended to ask them about the name because it rang a bell, but the answer shook her even more.

"Yes?" said Sirius absently.

"You are Padfoot?" she asked, a bit more assuredly.

The two Marauders looked at each other and winced. They had an inkling about where it would lead.

“Yes.” Sirius answered. “But don’t tell anyone, please.”

“Don’t worry.” she replied. “Your secret is safe with us.”

“Harry told us so.” Sirius stated, bringing the initial subject back on its tracks.

Hermione looked at them. “We don’t know where he is. He left suddenly, when we were speaking about... about how we warned Dumbledore on his behalf.”

“That was you?” asked Remus.

They winced, but Hermione continued. “Harry was already on the battle site, and just contacted us briefly. When he came back, we were discussing about the French rooms of the castle and-”

“French rooms?” asked Sirius. “Never heard of them. Are these classrooms which changed name recently?”

“No. Actually, they haven’t been visited in 100 years. Until recently, that is.” Hermione answered, and Tracey and Ron looked smug. “But it’s not the point. We were speaking about the passwords, I recall.” she frowned.

“Yes.” Tracey intervened. “And he left when you spoke about...”

The three of them looked at each other.

“What?” Ginny enquired.

“Fire.” the three of them said at the same time.

Remus gasped. “Fire? You are sure?”

They nodded. “Why?” asked Hermione.

“I can’t tell you now. I have to be sure. Last time I saw him alone, he was concerned about fire too...” Remus trailed off, before standing abruptly. “Thank you.” he said, dragging Sirius on his feet. “We’ll tell you more as soon as possible. As soon as we’ re back.”

Hermione nodded and stood as well, and the students were left to ponder the teachers’ words as they all left the room.

As teachers, Remus and Sirius had to stay in Hogwarts to oversee the students’ activities. However, they could use some week-ends to themselves as well. As none of them had done so since the school year started, they merely filled a form and owed it to McGonagall before heading out. As soon as they reached the usual place behind Hagrid’s hut, they transfigured their clothes into muggle ones and Apparated to Windsor. The sight that "graced" their eyes was daunting. The aisle of the beautiful castle in which they had fought wasn’t much more than a charred ruin.

“That’s not possible, that’s not possible...” Sirius trailed off, walking toward the blackened walls with a haunted look. He was quickly stopped by one of the sixty firemen on guard around the place, a grizzled man with ice-blue eyes.

“What do you want, sir?” the man asked.

As Remus was a bit more collected, although he dreaded the possible answer, he addressed him. “Has there been... casualties? I have a cousin who I... know... fought the flames.”

Blue eyes peered at him intently for a few seconds, before the man answered. “There has been bodies burnt, but the coroner told us they were dead before the fire happened. Thanks to St. Florian, nobody had been caught in the fire.”

“St. Florian?” asked Sirius. “Who’s this?”

The fire-fighter looked at him with a smile. “Why, it’s our patron saint, of course.”

Remus regained his speech enough for another question. "Have there been injuries?"

"Of course." the man answered. "Forty men were sent to the nearby hospitals. With a fire like this, it's a miracle that it hadn't been more. If I didn't know better, I could swear it was alive. The way it came and went and-"

"Which hospitals, please?" asked Remus, ready to go through all of them in order to find Harry.

"Depends." the man said, taking a sheet of paper from his shirt pocket. "What's your cousin's name?"

The two wizards looked at each other. It would work, or it wouldn't... "We don't know." Remus answered while Sirius extracted his wand slowly, ready to Obliviate the man if there was a need to.

"You don't know?" asked the man and they shook their head.

"He changed his names several times in the past, and it has been a few years since we last met. For all I know, he might have his car's plate as name." Remus said.

The fireman scoffed. "Yeah, I remember someone doing that, I saw it on the news." He then turned serious again. "So, you search for a nameless man." he said, and pointed his finger on his sheet. "I have just the one."

The two Marauders leaned and read the line. "What does that mean?" asked Sirius.

"Name: John Doe." the man answered. "It's the name we give to all unidentified person. Hospital: Charing Cross Hospital. You know where it is?"

The two wizards looked at each other uneasily before Sirius looked at him. "We just tell that to a cab and it's okay, I suppose?"

“Right. And here, it’s said that his state is serious.” the man said, finishing his line before looking at them. “Serious, not critical, which means he’ll survive. Don’t worry.”

“Thank you. Very much.” Remus said, dragging Sirius along. The two of them walked in the truck’s tracks, turning to look at the castle set against the clear afternoon sky. Their last sight of it was the blackened and charred tower and people working around it to clean the rubble. They looked like white worms on a rotting body, and Remus shuddered.

Once out of sight, they Apparated to Sirius’ home, where a few restorative potions were stored. It wasn’t uncommon for each and every powerful pureblood family to have a long-lasting stock of these. It wasn’t uncommon either for these potions to be trapped or otherwise tampered. However, Sirius had checked all of them with a patented Potion Master – not Snape – and had been assured of these potions’ usefulness.

After pocketing a couple vials each, they Apparated to an empty alleyway nearby. They then walked for the taxi line nearby and took a cab to the hospital where they thought Harry was.

When they arrived and asked for John Doe, the young and pretty nurse at the reception desk scoffed at them.

“John Doe? Come on guys, you surely have a better pick-up line.” she said with a flirtatious smile towards Sirius. “What will it be?”

Sirius started to smile back, before being elbowed by Remus. “Right. Err... Miss... Uh.”

“ Deborah Appleby, Mister Mysterious.” she said, batting her eyelashes. “But you can call me... anytime.”

“That’s enough!” Remus was incensed. It was something to flirt, but they weren’t there to do that at all. They were checking on the health of a friend’s son. “We want to know where John Doe is.”

The nurse pouted, and turned toward the computingy, re-buttoning her blouse and muttering something in the way. Remus' enhanced hearing caught the words "spoilsports" and "hunk" somewhere. The nurse gave them the information quickly, though, and pointed to the elevators behind them.

The elevators...

Several minutes later, an older nurse, a smirk on her lips, brought the two wide-eyed and frightened wizards in the appropriate room.

"There you are, me boys. Y'have a good day."

They nodded their thanks, and noticed three things. Two beds and a man sitting and reading a newspaper near one of them. Supposing that the man was coming to see his relative, they checked the other bed and found an elderly woman there.

They looked at each other. "Nah." Sirius said, and Remus nodded.

They then looked at the first bed and recognized the man quite easily. It was Henry Evans. Harry's adult shape. As they approached him, the sitting man looked at them intently. "You know him?" he asked.

They nodded wordlessly. "Is he...?" Remus asked.

"He's fine." the unknown man answered, standing. "But he hasn't woken up yet. What's his name?"

Remus and Sirius looked at each other uneasily.

"I'm Rupert Perkins." the man said, stroking his goatee. "I worked as a doctor during the... fire. This man came and healed seven firemen before collapsing. The lungs, I think. We keep him under morphine, since he seemed to be in pain earlier." he finished, pointing at the dangling bottle.

"Pain?" Sirius enquired, but his next question was interrupted by Remus.

“Morphine? What’s that?”

“It’s a drug to ease the pain.”

Remus looked at Harry’s prone body for a few moments. “Does it affect the mind?” he finally asked.

“Well... yes. It eases the pain by-”

“Remove it.” Remus interrupted him, remembering the last time Harry’s mind had been touched.

“But... the pain...”

“I’ll take charge of it.” Sirius offered, and he took a bottle from his pocket.

“We need him awake. Enough so that he can drink.”

Rupert nodded, and he went to where the needles were plunging in Harry’s body. In a swift motion, he removed them and put the bandage back in place. He then stopped the perfusion and returned to his seat.

“Why are you staying here?” asked Remus.

“I don’t have any patients here. It’s not even my hospital. But this man is a mystery. The seven men he healed were almost dead. And he looked as if it was his personal task to heal them despite his failing health.”

At the same time, Harry started to moan. In front of Rupert’s surprised gaze, the man shrunk to the size of a kid and a hideous scar appeared on his forehead. The kid opened his eyes, and the doctor recoiled in shock. The water-like eyes, despite surprising the two other men, didn’t seem to trouble them much, and one of them held the boy upright despite his moans, while the other made him

drink from the strange bottle. And both of them were addressing him as "Harry."

"Mein... brain... mushy..." Harry said, his head lolling. "Ich kan't... concentrer... enough."

Several other words came out of his lips, some in languages that were supposed dead. Sirius and Remus looked at each other, and the latter looked at the doctor again. "What exactly does morphine to a mind and how long had he been subjected to it?"

"We don't know exactly." the doctor said. "The universal use of morphine is to calm pain, and the local doctor saw him in pain yesterday, so he gave some of it to him. It has been 17-or-so hours."

"seventzehn heures..." Harry said from between Sirius' arms. "Und quarante-five minuten." He heard himself and giggled. "Bummer. Soy encore mushy."

The three others looked at him, and Remus opened his mouth to speak, but was interrupted by another giggle from the boy. "Better non, Remus. If ich transform like je speak..."

The werewolf smiled, having caught the gist of Harry's slurred sentence. It also meant that the boy was still able to pick his thoughts, because he hadn't voic-

"Yup." Harry said.

Wordlessly, Sirius took another potion from his pocket, and poured it into Harry's mouth.

"Better." Harry said. "Another, bitte. Err... je meant please. Oh well." he giggled again, but it seemed more controlled. "And I heard ça... that, Remus!"

"But, Harry, you can't take more than two in a day!" the werewolf argued.

“Who said that? Snape? Gib mir some encore! Je feel my mind's back on track.”

“We can't do that here, though, Harry, and you know that.”

The boy slumped. “Alright, okay. Do your worst. And take him with us.” he finished, without telling who him was.

It soon dawned in Rupert's mind that the "him" could very well be himself, and he took a tentative step backward, but Remus jumped from the bed to hold his wrist. “Has anything been taken from him?” he asked.

The doctor shook his head. “Only his clothes.” he answered, pointing to the cupboard. The man was holding his arm with a stronger grip than his physical appearance let on, and Rupert was forced to follow. Once Harry's clothes were properly stored in his arms by the other man, the doctor felt strangely compressed as if he couldn't breathe anymore. He closed his eyes, trying to fight the feeling, but it intensified suddenly before disappearing completely, and the unknown man released his hand, before grabbing the clothes from his arms.

“Alright, Moony?” a voice asked.

The other man answered. “Yes. Give me a minute. Forced Apparation and all this sort of things...”

“Of course.”

Rupert opened his eyes and found himself in a completely different room. Granted, it was still a bedroom, but it was for one person only. And that was the smallest of the changes: the bed was king-sized and had a canopy and curtains hanging; the room was huge and the furniture seemed fit for a king; the walls were decorated with seaside patterns on a sky blue background, and he had the impression that the elements were moving.

“Where am I?” he whispered.

“In my house.” replied the man helping the boy down another bottle. “I’m Sirius, by the way, and the man resting next to you is Remus.” Sirius had figured that the doctor would be less at a loss if he had names to put on faces. They could always Obliviate him later if there was a need. “And here is Harry.” he finished, nodding towards the boy in his arms.

Said boy was trembling, the concoction being absorbed by his body and acting on it. To the adults’ surprise, his eyes became like little fireballs for a short moment, before he closed them. Smoke erupted from his ears, and he fell back in Sirius’ arms.

“Alright, Harry?”

“What? Err... Yeah, I think. At least I’m not mixing languages anymore. What was that, by the way?”

“Peppering up mixed with healing and other draughts.” Sirius replied, and he smirked. “Black family personal reserve.”

“Impressive. I’m happy you had that. I think I would have had problems thinking straight for the next months or so. What was it, this time? Not the twins, I hope?”

“No, Rupert here told us it was morphine.”

Harry nodded. He knew a bit about morphine because of the memories he had taken from another doctor, years ago. “I will need a bit more potion. My mind still resembles a puddle of mud, although it has solidified enough for proper discussion.” ‘I’ll have to find a way to block that effect.’ he added for himself. ‘There’s no need to be vulnerable to muggle syringes.’

While Harry drank the same potion again, the three others looked at him thoughtfully. After the repeated eyes flashing and ears smoking – it was stronger this time – he looked at Sirius with a wide smile on his face.

“Thank you.” he said, before returning to Henry Evans’ shape. “I’m back. I’ll need to spend a long time in my mind to check for possible damage, but I’m glad to be back. Thank you guys.”

“No bother, Tiger. Really.” Sirius said, giving him a one-armed hug.

“Tiger?” Harry asked.

Remus merely smiled but Sirius displayed a wide grin and patted his back. “Of course! We weren’t going to blabber about you or Kentaro in front of the Headmaster, were we? And, as the last Marauders, we have the right to choose your name. Do you prefer Prongslet?”

Harry blushed slightly. “No, thank you.” he mumbled. “Why Tiger, though?”

“Your current forename suggested it, Harry.” Remus answered from the armchair. “Do you remember telling us that Taro meant Tiger in Japanese?”

Harry nodded and they settled into a peaceful silence for a few seconds, before Remus spoke again.

“Why did you want Rupert here?” Remus asked Harry, and the named man jumped.

Harry looked at him. “I wanted to thank you. Rupert, is it? Thank you because, if you hadn’t been there, I could be dead now.”

Rupert shook his head. “I’m a doctor. It’s my job to heal people. What I don’t understand, though, is how you practically resurrected the seven firemen who were caught in the collapse.”

Harry looked at him intently for a few seconds. Sirius and Remus understood what he was doing and they didn’t move to further his concentration. The doctor’s mind provided Harry with several interesting ideas. Firstly, the man seemed sufficiently open-minded to accept the idea of magic. And secondly, his mind looked like Genevieve’s: it was full to the brink and perfectly ordered. Like her,

the man seemed happy in his celibacy despite the feeling of something lacking in his life. Harry smirked at the idea of playing matchmaker for his friend.

“What do you know about magic, Rupert?”

It started a simplified explanation about the magical world, and Harry helped the man to store everything related to him in a safe box buried under his consciousness building. With Genevieve's experience in mind, he also added a mental block preventing the man from discussing about everything that was in the safe to people other than him.

After they promised to see him again, Rupert gave them his apartment address near King's Cross hospital, as well as his work address there. As Harry and Remus were still recuperating, Sirius was designated to Apparate the good doctor home afterwards. The three wizards spent the rest of the afternoon discussing about miscellaneous topics, some of them including the Marauders and their pranks.

A month earlier...

A disgruntled Igor Karkaroff activated the magical device which allowed him to meet his contact in the Russian muggle Secret Services. The wizard had spent the last few days exploring Geneva, and meeting the very few Calder families which shared some kind of resemblance with his quarry. Unsuccessfully.

The next day, the GRU General met him in the designated tavern behind the Botanical Gardens of Moscow.

“What did the hostage say?” asked the muggle, knowing that the other man had method of interrogation surpassing his own. Even if the General could make anyone admit anything, it wasn't necessarily the truth, and that "anyone" person wasn't generally able to talk, walk, or even live afterwards.

Karkaroff shrugged. He wasn't going to tell the man that the hostage had been nicked away from under his nose. "Nothing important. Just that the list you gave me wasn't complete." he said.

The General shrugged in the same way Karkaroff had done before and, if the wizard had been more proficient in peripheral Legilimency, he would have known that the man was mocking him. As it was, he was left to wonder, while the General spoke aloud. "Of course it wasn't complete. At that time, we hadn't finished compiling the list of Calders from the Swiss Immigration Services or those given by the airports."

"And?" asked Karkaroff. Even if he didn't know what an airport was, he didn't ask about it, sticking to his line of conduct regarding the muggles in general and the specimen in front of him in particular.

Said specimen didn't answer and extracted another list from his pocket. Just as Karkaroff was going to grasp it, he took it back. "I haven't received my shipment." he stated. "I'll need more, though. To compensate for the lateness, and for the additional list."

Karkaroff blinked, before barking a laugh. "Make that three." he said, recovering his usual stance. "That should be well enough."

The General nodded. "Today? I prepared the place."

"Today."

The man gave him the list, and Karkaroff, wanting to appease the relation he kept with him, directly Apparated to his usual whisky purveyor. After paying for the three casks – he knew he'd better pay or the distillery would close under the financial strain – he Obliviated the employee and Apparated each of the voluminous wooden containers, one after the other, directly in the General's basement.

He then returned to his office in Durmstrang. Despite the urgency of his hunt, he had to sleep his exhaustion off, and he also had to lead the Institute for a few days a week. He knew that if he didn't he'd be replaced. Forcefully.

After four weeks spent sharing his time between his Headmaster duties and the chase of the Calder families around the world, he finally found a link to his prey. Benjamin and Grace Calder, with their three kids, had moved to Tokyo a few months ago. The family had exactly the structure of the missing Dursley family: ages matched and, except Harry Potter, the brood matched as well: one 10 years old boy, and 7 years old twin girls. Karkaroff went there to investigate, but was lost in a country where he couldn't understand anything. Taking refuge in an international hotel, he tried to find someone able to translate things for him. Stranded in the Hilton, it took him a full day to find a lone tourist able to speak Japanese. It was a young man, named Simon Pawn, and a quick mental snoop told Karkaroff that Pawn was also a student participating in an exchange program between New York City's and Tokyo's branches of the same school.

After taking control of him, Karkaroff left the hotel and forced Simon to give the proper indications to the cab. After stopping a block away from the bank, they went there on foot. They entered the bank where Benjamin Calder – or Vernon Dursley – worked, and waited in the queue for a teller to be free. His words still influencing the young man, Karkaroff watched as he asked to open an account to store his supposedly enormous gains from the national lottery, and to see Mr Calder in order to do so.

The bank manager was rarely seeing individuals, especially that close to closing time. It was more of a post for managing the bank itself, or to see the owners of really large accounts. Even if Karkaroff hadn't known much about it before taking it from Simon's mind, mentioning the Japanese lottery system had been a stroke of genius. The last wins had been quite massive and publicized, and the teller introduced the two of them into Vernon's office.

“Good evening, gentlemen.” Vernon said, standing up. “Please take a seat. I heard you are the last lucky winner of the lottery? Which one?” he asked with a sweet smile.

The addressed man, Simon, was seating on a chair when the question was asked, and he stopped, looking at Karkaroff for an answer. Vernon followed the young man's gaze, and was surprised to

see the older man – he thought it was the young one’s father – aim a stick at him and speak strange words.

A stick!

Strange words!

Harry!

He didn’t have time to react, though, as the Petrifying spell hit him, and he fell back in his chair, straight as a rod. With a smug expression, Karkaroff stowed his wand in his pocket and grabbed a syringe from there.

A syringe?

The Headmaster of Durmstrang Institute considered the muggle contraption in undisguised disgust. How could Dumbledore give him a muggle device? Sighing, he approached from Vernon’s prone body, intending to whisk him away. However, while he had been contemplating the syringe, someone had entered the office silently. As Karkaroff was grasping the man’s shoulder and uttering the activation word, a white-haired man lunged at him, making him lose contact with Vernon’s body just before the portkey activated. The two of them landed in a heap in the middle of Albus Dumbledore’s office.

In the middle of a meeting of the Order of the Phoenix.
A few minutes before...

“Welcome again, and thank you for being there.” Dumbledore said. “I asked for this meeting in order to discuss about the recent events in the wizarding world, and the muggle world as well. Some of us have fought the Death Eaters recently and, apart from the fact that we had been informed mere seconds before the battle, I don’t want to speak about how. You are perhaps wondering, however, why we did so.”

“True.” said Moody, and the others nodded as well. The ones who hadn’t fought looked around inquiringly.

“It seems that Voldemort was seeking the Crown Jewels in order to prepare a ritual. Our intelligence didn’t provide information about it, but we can infer things from the coveted items. The Crown Jewels include several highly priced gems which, as some of you know, can make a good start for any long-lasting draught, or even serve as material sacrifice to invoke a spirit.”

Seeing their uneasy glances, Dumbledore nodded grimly. “If only material wealth is used, though, the invoked spirit will be feeble. Animal and human sacrifice yield more power, and magical beings gives even more. That’s why the spirit invocation rituals are controlled by the Ministry.”

“What about the cup, Albus?” asked Moody, his eye trained on the wooden chalice resting on Dumbledore’s desk.

“That, my dear Alastor, is an item I thought lost for a century.” his eyes twinkled suddenly. “I recognized it immediately when Rodolphus Lestrange was holding it victoriously, and that’s why I Summoned it at once. I don’t know exactly what use Voldemort wanted to make of it, but I’m working on it.”

He smiled.

“I have the pleasure to show you... the Goblet of Fire.”

Very few Order members were old enough to actually remember the artefact and its use, but many of them had heard stories about it, at one point or another. Several persons started to ask questions, but the impromptu arrival of two old men interrupted them, and several of them drew their wand at the unknown – and swearing – tangle of legs. At least half a dozen spells flew at once, half of them intending to Petrify the target and the other half rendering it unconscious. The result was two very still and very unconscious old men lying on the Headmaster’s carpet.

“Karkaroff...” whispered Moody, venom dripping from his voice. “And the other one must be a Death Eater too.”

Dumbledore stood up and brought his magic around him. It was a cheap trick but, a wizard with his experience and power could tame a whole Hall with it. "I ask you to keep your cool." he demanded. "Igor had approached me several months ago, sincerely questing for redemption."

"More afraid for his guts, I say." Moody mumbled. It hadn't escaped his notice that the man had approached Dumbledore exactly when Voldemort had started to rise again. Having ratted so many of his brethren, Karkaroff was certainly very high on the Dark Lord's to-kill list. The paranoid ex-Auror still didn't trust him. Like he didn't trust Snape, by the by.

While Moody was reflecting about Karkaroff, Dumbledore continued. "Since we didn't have the resource to do so here, I have set Igor on Harry Potter's trail." he looked down. "And I gave him a portkey to here in case he found something interesting. Don't worry, the portkey was keyed to his person, and no impostor could have travelled with it."

The Headmaster drew his wand and aimed at his colleague from the East. "I wonder why these two arrived in such shape, though." he mused, referring to the tangle of limbs that had landed on his office's floor. "Enervate. Finite Incantatem."

Alastor Moody had sensed the old man's intention, like several other Order members and, as their wands were already drawn, they quickly cast a concealing charm on themselves and their neighbours.

Karkaroff looked around, and recognised the office. He also felt several gazes on him and noticed several concealment charms around him. 'Must be a session of the famous Order Dumbledore is credited with.' he thought. The members of said Order were concealed, though, and he couldn't see their face.

"How nice it is to see you there, Igor. I take it that you found something interesting? Who is that gentleman?"

The addressed man looked at the prone shape near him and frowned. "I don't know." he said in a disgruntled voice, and clearly heard several snorts around him.

"Silence please." Dumbledore asked his crowd before turning to the man who was tentatively standing up. "Please explain, then."

"I was on a trail and I think I found Vernon Dursley." he said and, ignoring the couple of gasps around him, he continued. "I found and Petrified him, but, when I activated the portkey, someone yanked my arm off of him."

"Who?" asked Dumbledore, before remembering the other man on the ground. "Who is him?"

"I don't know, but we can ask him." Karkaroff replied.

"True."

While Karkaroff cancelled the Petrifying spell, Dumbledore conjured a chair. They then levitated the man to the chair and Karkaroff magically bound him there. They then woke him up.

Brown eyes snapped open and looked back at them.

"Who are you?" asked Dumbledore – the man knew that, if the subject was willing, asking questions instead of grabbing answers from the man's mind would prevent tedious repetitions later.

The man was unwilling, though, and looked at him defiantly.

Dumbledore sighed. "Very well, then. Legil-"

The Headmaster stopped his incantation suddenly. Something had appeared from thin air, atop the man's right shoulder, and all spectators looked at the thing in disbelief. It was a hand, and it lowered and grasped the man's shoulder. Dumbledore suddenly understood why it was there and started another incantation, but, by the time it was finished, the hand and the grasped man had

disappeared, leaving ropes to fall on the conjured chair. The old man slumped back on his chair and pinched the bridge of his nose for several seconds.

He was interrupted by Karkaroff. "I left Dursley Petrified." he said. "I should go."

Still reflecting about Hogwarts and the supposed impossibility to Apparate there, Dumbledore acquiesced wordlessly. Karkaroff left, and his Order members started to ask questions about what had happened with the hand. It was only when the meeting was adjourned that Dumbledore found that he had forgotten to ask a very specific question to his Russian counterpart.

Where had he found Dursley?

Not wanting to be drained by the anti-Apparation spell he had just cast on his office, he transferred its control to Hogwarts before heading to lunch.

A few minutes back in time again...

That Monday morning, the Gryffindor and Slytherin second year were having two free periods, and Harry Potter was playing Chess with Ron when Cassie warned him of yet another muggle appearing in the Headmaster office with Karkaroff. He was so surprised that he dropped the Knight on an invalid square, and said Knight, belonging to Ron's magical set, began to rant at him before going back to its starting spot.

"Sorry, I have to go." he told Ron. 'Harry business.' he added mentally. Ron nodded briefly and tapped the chess board with his wand for the pieces to return to their starting positions.

Harry left the Games Parlour and quickly found a corner where no one was looking at, and he directly Apparated out, heading to the Headmaster's office.

Despite the concealment charms, he knew that several people were there. A man was just rising from the floor and another one was still

lying there. Using what he learnt before, Harry willed his eardrums in the room, and heard everything.

Despite not knowing the interrogated man, he suspected that he knew his family, and couldn't let Dumbledore read his mind. In the same way than with his now-gaseous-again ears, he extended his hand out and grabbed the man's shoulder. He knew it hadn't been the best option, and realized it immediately, when the brunt of an anti-Apparition field hit him. He found himself trapped, in the office of the supposedly most powerful wizard, with numerous members of the Order of the Phoenix as well. The only thing that wasn't in the tangible reality as well was the man in front of him.

Not having anything else to do, he entered the man's mind and the white building there, intending to have a chat with him. He knew that he wasn't much better than Dumbledore in that particular case, but it was done to protect himself and his family, not the contrary.

"Good morning." he said.

"Who are you?" asked the man's consciousness, clearly panicked. The man might have a cool facade, but his mind was another thing whatsoever. "What's happening? Where are we? Why can't I move?"

"I'm Harry." Honesty was a weapon as well. "We are temporarily trapped by a magic spell in the office of the wizard with a white beard."

"A spell? A wizard? There's no such thing as magic!"

Harry laughed, and the man looked around. "Where am I?"

"We are both in your mind. As we can't move, I thought it was the best place to have a chat."

"A chat? Why can't we move?"

"Because we have been trapped by a spell cast by that wizard with a white beard." Harry repeated, rolling his eyes.

“There’s no such thing as magic.”

Harry sighed, before smiling. The man’s last answer reminded him of the reaction of non-player characters in the multi-user dungeons he had played with Jorg, once: always the same answer to the same question.

“If there’s no such thing as magic, explain where we are.”

The man shook his head, not understanding. Since he was in the man’s mind, Harry noticed that the man’s body was moving as well, and he left to head to his own, just in time to see Dumbledore leaving the office. The gaseous reality didn’t feel like a block of glass anymore, but rather like syrup in which he could move, although it was difficult to do. Connecting his awareness to what Cassie was sending him, he understood that, since the castle’s consciousness was now in control of the anti-Apparation spell, it could help him move through it.

Five minutes later, the two of them were outside. The man beside him was quite stunned at hovering over a grey countryside, and Harry felt that he would be more receptive to the idea of magic from now on.

If what Karkaroff had told was true, Harry had work to do in Japan. Looking at his watch, he supposed that lunch was underway and decided that it was safe to mentally warn Tracey about his new destination. After doing so, he grabbed the man’s shoulder again and hurled the two of them through space until they arrived in Vernon’s office.

Harry sensed his surroundings, like he always did before Apparating in an unknown location, and found no one. ‘Of course,’ he thought, ‘the time isn’t the same in England and here.’ That late in the evening, nobody was there.

Harry jumped to his apartment, and dropped the unknown man in his own bedroom first. “I’m sorry.” he said, before Petrifying the man again. Finding Vernon was more important than discovering the

identity of people on his way. The white-haired man fell back on Harry's bed and the boy left the room, only to be engulfed in several anguished hugs. Harry didn't have time for small talk, though.

"Where's Uncle Ver- err... Benjamin?" he asked, remembering that even his family was using the false names.

Petunia was hiccupping in her tissue and wasn't in a talking state, and Jorg answered in her place. "He's in the University's Hospital. They still don't know what he... why are you here?" he asked suddenly. "I don't remember sending Quicksilver and, even though, you are awfully quick."

Harry nodded, having taken the hospital location and room number from Jorg's mind. "He had been cursed. I'll be back with him shortly."

He disappeared and headed there quickly. He found his uncle in a bed, with many devices around him. The mind of the nurse hovering in a corridor nearby gave him answers about most of them, and he Apparated in. After removing all the sensors and intravenous needles, he used Ravenclaw's ring to cast the Finite Incantatem on his uncle.

As soon as Vernon was free from the curse, he sat up suddenly and winced. Half an hour of forced immobility can do that to anyone. Harry didn't lose time, though. He went to the cupboard and stowed his uncle's clothes in a bag nearby before going back to him. Grabbing his hand, he Apparated both of them back to Harry's bedroom in the family's enlarged apartment.

"Do you know him?" asked Harry to his uncle.

Vernon looked at the man intently for a few seconds, but he shook his head negatively.

Harry knew he had to prepare for that Karkaroff fellow to appear, but, unless the older wizard had a portkey – something Harry doubted, since Karkaroff had left Dumbledore's office on foot –, he wouldn't be there before the next day. He left Vernon to the care of his family while he retreated to his own room with the unknown man, closing the

door after him. In front of the man's curious gaze, he transfigured a Lego-sized chair into a real one, before absently putting fire to the stack of wood in the fireplace – in a fit of Hogwarts-induced nostalgia, last summer, he had asked Abigail to include a fireplace in his bedroom while she was redesigning it; of course, the evacuation of fumes was done by an appropriate charm set in the fireplace itself.

He then dispelled the Petrifying spell and addressed the man. “You believe in magic, now?”

The man slowly sat up, blinking. “It's impossible... I'm dreaming... It's a nightmare, a hallucination... isn't it?”

“Pinch yourself, then.”

The man did. Hard. And he jumped as if he wasn't expecting the pain. “I'm not dreaming.” he stated, before sitting on the edge of the bed.

Harry drew a large breath. “First of all, I'd like to thank you for preventing my uncle from being abducted.” he said. “That being said, I want to know what you were doing with him.”

The man had recovered his facade, though, and he stood up suddenly, smoothing his clothes. “It's none of your business, kid.” the man said, seeming to notice Harry's size for the first time.

“I want answers,” Harry started, “and I want them now. Otherwise, I'll get them directly from your mind.”

“Why don't you take them now?” the man challenged. “Wouldn't it be easier for you?”

“Yes it would.” Harry answered coldly. “But that would be impolite.”

“You're just a boy. What are you going to do?”

The addressed boy snorted. “A boy who just dragged you around the world, and that wasn't a dream either. Now, are you going to tell me your place in this or should I take more proactive measures?”

The man glared at him. "Try me."

Harry looked at the man's defiant look and sighed. He knew the attitude hid the man's uncertainty about his current predicament. He went forward for half a second, focusing on the man's identity.

"Your name is Matthew Xavier Powell." he then said. "Your friends call you Maxwell. Your father was-"

"Stop!" the man exclaimed, before looking down, panting slightly. 'How could that boy know anything about my father?' he asked himself.

After a few seconds, Powell sighed and spoke again. "Alright, alright. I'm Matthew Powell. I'm a selling agent in a vacuum cleaner company, and-"

"Wrong answer. Even if I don't go through your mind, I still can tell if you lie to me." Harry sighed. "Let's start again: what's your job?"

"I'm..." the man started, his eyes darting between the boy and the door. He suddenly jumped and tried to get there, but Harry locked the door magically, and nothing happened when the man turned the handle. There was no keyhole, and the man wondered about it.

"The door is magically sealed." Harry stated, boredom evident in his stance. "You can't get out."

The man took something from his pocket and aimed at Harry. "Let me out."

Harry looked at the gun facing him, and at the man, boredom replaced by disbelief. The man started to smirk, but Harry's disbelief left to be replaced by amusement. "Shoot." he said.

Powell looked at the boy in wonder. He had never wanted to shoot him. In his line of duty, he had killed, sure, sometimes in cold blood, even. But he had never shot kids. He sighed and stored his gun away.

“That’s what I thought.” Harry said, before amending himself. “That’s what you thought, actually. Besides, me dead, you’d have been blocked here.” he sat back while the man returned to sit on the bed. “I guess the wizards didn’t search you, then. My mistake. So... what’s your job?”

“I’m a secret agent.” Powell answered, defeated.

“So? What was so special that you drew your gun there?” Harry asked, and the spy looked at him in disbelief. The boy smiled. “Don’t you think wizards know about hiding and stuff? You didn’t hear about us before today, right?”

“Well... I guess. But...”

“What?”

“How do you people hide from us? And from cameras? I mean... there’s got to be security cameras in some places, isn’t it?”

Harry thought about it. It was true, and didn’t make sense. “Yes, of course...” he said, and started to reflect about it aloud. “There are magic spells able to hide someone from others, but I don’t know how they work. If it’s not on the onlooker’s mind but on light manipulations, cameras won’t pick it up. I mean... if the spell redirects the photons around one’s body, nothing will be able to see the person.”

Harry looked up to see the man’s surprised look. “What? One of my friends is a particle scientist. I ought to know about photons. Besides, that’s just one explanation, and it doesn’t cover the wizards not careful enough to cast that kind of spell. Another explanation about not being seen is that wizards live completely on the side of the country. To put a security camera somewhere, you’ll have to actually go there. Wizards’ properties are surrounded by protections and wards that ordinary people won’t cross voluntarily.”

“They never get out of them?”

“No.” A short pause. “Actually, what I mean is that they go out but use several magical means of transportation. They can disappear from a place to reappear someplace else. They can also use fireplaces.”

“Fireplaces?” asked Powell, looking worriedly at the one in Harry’s bedroom.

Harry chuckled. “Don’t worry. To do that, the fireplace needs to be connected to the Floo network.”

“The flue?” asked the man, looking at the fireplace exhaust.

“Not exactly. F-L-O-O. It’s just a name.” He thought about for a second, before smiling. “It’s like the telephone network, in fact. You could own a phone, but it wouldn’t work until being connected to the phone lines. Same here. And, once a wizarding family’s fireplace is hooked to the Floo, they can travel to magical malls and other places without needing to get out of their houses.”

They both looked at the fireplace in silence for a few seconds.

“Finally, I’m sure that there are departments in the Ministry of Magic to deal about the Secrecy issues, and they must have better answers and solutions to your questions. I’m just a regular citizen.”

“You have a Ministry?”

“Britain has, I don’t know about the other countries.” Harry said, not wanting to reveal his knowledge of magical Japan. “Anyways, we aren’t here to discuss about wizards. What’s your agency? CIA, like the agent I Obliviated, or another?”

“I’m no... What did you say?”

“There was a secret agent too nosy for her own good. She had found my uncle and I removed her memories of it. Now, what’s your agency? Rest assured that my ears are safe: no one ever guessed one of my secrets without me telling first.”

The man sighed. "Military Intelligence, sixth section."

"What country is that?" asked Harry, frowning.

Powell straightened up. "I belong to Her Majesty the Queen of England's Secret Intelligence Service." he said in a dignified tone.

Harry was silent for several seconds. "England, too, then." he whispered. After a few more seconds, he looked at the man resolutely. "Why are you here?"

The man settled back, his hands on the bed and his eyes towards the ceiling. "I followed a trail that our agents in Russia have overheard, and it led here. When I saw the other man with your uncle, I thought he wanted to inject him some poison, and I... intervened."

"Inject? Why so?"

"He had a syringe and he seemed ready to give Calder a shot. When I jumped on him, though, he was saying something and the office disappeared."

'Portkey.' Harry thought, shocked at the wizards' use of dangerous items as portkey focuses. After a few seconds, he spoke again. "Do you know why there even was a trail, to begin with?" he asked, rather annoyed that the secret services of different countries could follow each other without reason. 'What will it be next, the Mossad?' Harry asked himself.

"The... other agent... told us that there was no apparent reason, but the man investigating the trail is the head of the GRU and we suspected that it must be important."

"Was he the man who tried to strangle my uncle?"

"No. And he wouldn't do it anyways." Powell said and, noticing Harry's inquiring gaze, he explained. "Generally, top-ranking officers

don't compromise themselves in assassination missions. Especially in such a public place."

Harry nodded absently and stayed thoughtful for several seconds afterwards.

"Who knows about you being there?" he asked suddenly, and Powell jumped at his suddenness.

"I don't think it is of any interest for you, sonny. I-"

Harry sighed, and focused on the man's mind again. "Alright, just your boss." he said, and the other man looked at him with wide eyes.

"You are violating my privacy! It's... It's-"

"I'm sorry but, as I told you earlier, wizards don't belong to the "regular" people, and normal rules don't apply. It may be inherently wrong, but nothing forbids me from killing you right there. Or take all your memories and leave you in the streets to survive as a nameless beggar." Harry answered, more for show than anything else. He wasn't ready to kill the man for nothing or Oblivate him without reason, but he also wanted him to stop arguing all the time. He needed this information. And maybe his help to stop the muggles services from tracing his family.

"What are you going to do, now?" he asked.

"Whatever do you mean, kiddo?"

"Well... you have found the Benjamin Calder whom you were searching for, and me."

"What about you, lad?"

Harry sighed and rubbed his temples. "Please... stop calling me like that."

"What's your name, then?"

“Call me Harry, if you must.” Harry answered, and reverted to his natural shape – minus the eyes.

“Whoa!” exclaimed the man, before rubbing his eyes.

Harry took advantage of the man’s silence to explain why he had started being observed by the CIA, and how he suspected the other secret services to follow the lead like a red herring. The man digested all this slowly, and Harry exited his room for a few seconds, dispelling the locking charm on the way out. The Dursleys were going to bed, and he wished them a good night, telling them that he would deal with the wizard – Karkaroff – as soon as possible.

When he returned to his room, he saw Powell looking at the fireplace in amazement. “Still wondering?”

The man nodded. “Sure beats anything Beth or Liz could invent.”

“Beth or Liz?”

The man looked at him. “Ex-wives. Believe me, kid-”

“Harry.”

“Alright, alright. Harry, then. I lived through several marriages and the things those two could make up still baffles me.” He sighed. “Conversely, since I reached the retirement age, I stopped asking questions about that, and accepted my fate. I’ll retire and end my days lonely.” he smirked, but the smile didn’t reach the eyes. Harry was startled by the man’s palpable bitterness.

“You are retiring soon?”

“Yes. I intended this mission to be the last. I killed too many people, some of them without even a good reason.”

Harry thought about it. “Would you like to work for me?” he asked, and the man looked at him sharply.

“Why would I work for a mere boy, who-”

“For the last time, I am not a mere boy!” Harry exclaimed, and his eyes flashed dangerously. Recovering his calm quickly, he concentrated and became much taller and much older in a couple of seconds. Once done, he looked down at the man sitting in front of him. “Are you going to stop calling me a kid, now?” he asked.

Powell acquiesced, his mouth gaping.

“Good.” Harry said, before turning back into himself. “I need a man to stop that endless hunt. Someone who knows the mugg- I mean... "regular" secret services.”

“What do you mean by regular?”

“Just "non-magical" services like the CIA, the Russian one, and possibly others. The goal is to spread enough convincing lies and half-truths so that they leave us in peace.” Harry looked at the man. “Are you the one I can trust with this?”

Powell looked at him with an intent look. “Why me?”

“Because you are here. Because you know the field and the people in it. Because your career is behind you. And because I think you would do a fine job.”

The two of them stayed silent for a couple of minutes, looking the small fireplace again.

“I’ll do it.” Powell said suddenly.

“What?”

“I’m sure you heard me.” the man smirked.

“Why?”

“Master of one-word questions, now, sir wizard? I’m will do it because, first of all, I owe you for taking me out of the wasps’ nest. I don’t know what these... people... were going to do to me. Secondly, as I told you, I’m going to retire alone otherwise, and I don’t think I’d be able to stay peacefully in one place. I lived all my life in the run, you know. Perhaps that’s why they all left.” he finished in a whisper, more for himself.

“Thank you.” Harry said. “We will start by working on your mind tomorrow, in Switzerland.”

“My mind? What-?”

“It wouldn’t be good for a mind-reader to find about your mission now would it? You need some sort of protection.”

“Ah. Err... of course.”

After a few more minutes of light talk, Harry checked the man’s mind a last time and was satisfied to see that Powell was now committed to his side. He then led the man out of the room and went to the kitchen for the two of them to grab a quick bite. Vernon and Jorg were there too, and Harry made the introductions, telling the two men that Powell was going to sleep in his bedroom tonight.

Once refreshed, Harry stood up and surveyed the three men. Jorg had already started speaking about computers and strange devices with the spy, and Vernon was listening intently. Harry smiled. Those three weren’t perhaps friends or anything, but they seemed to get together pretty well despite the spy’s sour personality.

He took his leave, telling them that he’d be back the next day to take care of the intruding wizard, and headed back to Hogwarts, arriving just five minutes late in Transfiguration. He lost a few points but got them back quickly when he successfully repeated his Knut-to-sword transfiguration. ‘Teachers do speak to each other behind our back.’ he thought amusedly.

‘Where were you?’ Tracey mentally asked. ‘Ron wasn’t clear about where you went.’

‘Japan. Vernon has been Petrified.’

‘Oh! Alright.’

‘I’ll have to return there after Astronomy, tonight.’

‘Just so you know, Professor Lupin asked for you when he didn’t see you at lunch.’

Harry stayed mentally silent for several seconds, a few of which were needed to actually interact with his teacher. ‘I’ll see him at dinner, I guess.’

‘Alright.’

‘Err... McGonagall just asked if you intended to spend the period daydreaming.’

‘Damn!’ she exclaimed mentally, before giving a mumbled apology to the teacher and starting to work.
At the same time...

The wizard was disgruntled. Not only did he have to take the same route than everybody, but he had just remembered that he didn’t have the return portkey, this time. Whoever he would find there, he would have to bring them through the numerous steps in the International Floo Network.

That network had the particularity of needing operators to manipulate the large fireplaces and to place the long-distance Floo calls. As such, each of the Floo stations could be open all the time, when sufficiently manned, while others worked only as long as the operator was there.

Like the last time, Igor Karkaroff went through the Vladivostok Floo station. This time around, though, he had to stop there, as the

operator wasn't there. He was the only one in the arrival room, and he angrily picked up an old copy of a wizarding newspaper. The titles caught his attention, though, and he proceeded in reading.

Two hours later, the Floo operator would come back to work, only to find an empty place, and he would sit behind his desk without noticing the missing newspaper.

Karkaroff knew about the place where one of the Dark Lord's most powerful supporters had been imprisoned, since he had orchestrated the man's capture. Well, "man" was a term not fully describing the creature, since Fenrir Greyback was in a werewolf's state of mind all the time.

Knowing that the prison wasn't far from the International Floo Station, Karkaroff Apparated there and started to ask questions around. Since nobody in the prison remembered him – for the simple reason that he had Obliviated them all, the last time – he had to present his case several times before being brought to the high-security cell he requested.

The newspaper had been true, and the werewolf that had been imprisoned here wasn't there anymore. In his place, behind the repaired door, was another man, who presented the same enraged face. Added to his muscular build, it really was an impressive sight.

“It's Chikatio.” the guard whispered, visibly cowed by the large creature in front of them. “He had been found guilty of 52 murders since the other prisoner's escape, and-”

The rest of the sentence got drowned by the howl from the prison cell. ‘Must be a werewolf, then.’ Karkaroff thought. ‘Perhaps Fenrir bit him. I'll have to tell Dumbledore.’ He nodded to the guard and, after memorising the cell's location for a future Apparation jump, he left the dreary place.

Back at the Floo station, he had the surprise of finding a sign on the operator's desk: "gone out for a bite". Despite the comical aspect of the sign added to his earlier visit to a werewolf, Karkaroff wasn't

happy. 'Don't they work at all in here?' he angrily asked himself. 'No wonder there are so few wizards in Japan if we have to pass through here.'

After another few minutes of waiting, the operator came back and allowed him access to Tokyo. Remembering the bank name, Karkaroff got a taxi to there, Obliviating the driver before he left.

With a decided stance, he marched through the bank lobby toward Dursley's office and, not even wondering why the guards didn't intercept him, he entered said office and closed the door behind him. He didn't ask himself questions as to why the man wasn't Petrified anymore and, once again, he aimed his wand at him, the Petrifying curse on his lips.

He couldn't utter more than one syllable before the wand was ripped from his hands, heading to a... disembodied hand?

Remembering Dumbledore's office, Karkaroff looked at the hand in shock. "What...?" he started, but was rendered speechless when a mere boy appeared behind the hand. A boy with black hair and a jagged scar on the forehead. Harry Potter.

Karkaroff was elated, because he had just found Harry Potter. Wait till Dumbledore learns about it!

"Dumbledore won't know about it." the boy said suddenly, and Karkaroff recoiled, as if slapped. In one sentence, the boy had managed to issue a threat and to prove something: mind reading was possible without a spell. Karkaroff turned on his heels and tried to exit the office, but he found the door magically locked, and his shoulders slumped.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"You will return to Dumbledore and tell him that you failed to recognize my uncle for who he is."

"No! I..."

“Petrificatus Totalus.”

The man fell backwards and Harry and Vernon smiled at each other. “Glad to see him get what’s due to him.” Vernon said.

“Thanks, uncle.” Harry said, walking in front of the man’s desk. “I’ll be going, now. I have a package to leave to an old man.” he finished, pointing his thumb to the fallen man behind him.

“Go ahead, then.” Vernon said. “I’ll reconnect the cameras after your departure.”

“Thanks.”

“Thank you.”

They smiled, and Harry stuck the fallen man’s wand in his pocket before grabbing his robes and disappearing. He then went to his apartment to grab Powell as well. The spy was in the kitchen with Jorg, discussing electronic gadgets again. When he noticed the boy’s burden, he raised an eyebrow and was ready to ask about it, but Harry interrupted him.

“Good "morning" gentlemen. If you don’t mind, I still have to sleep, so I’d like this to be over with.”

They nodded and stood, before shaking hands solemnly. A little solemnly, and Harry noticed an amused glint in their eyes but refrained from launching into a long discussion. He would ask about it later. After saying goodbye to Jorg, he left with Powell, Karkaroff still in tow.

Harry had taken the Petrified wizard’s wand, but he didn’t know that the man had other interesting magical items as well. As the Headmaster of Durmstrang, where treachery was authorized and even encouraged – as long as it wasn’t discovered –, one had to guard one’s back. One of Karkaroff’s items was a necklace that was supposed to block any low-level physical hindrance spells. It hadn’t

completely blocked Harry's spell, but had reduced its duration, and the spell wore off while they were flying over China.

Karkaroff had been conscious all the time, and didn't have to ask whose wand was protruding from Harry's pocket. It was his and he grabbed it. Harry didn't have time to react as the man tried to Apparate from wherever he was. However, he already was in the gaseous reality and he was flying at a great speed as well. As a result, the Apparation failed and Karkaroff found himself back in the tangible reality, falling to the ground in the usual parabolic trajectory.

In and of itself, the situation wasn't deadly for a fully-qualified wizard like Igor Karkaroff. Falling from that height could give a wizard enough time to decide of which spell to use to break his fall.

However, instead of having that much time on his hands, Karkaroff had a problem.

The problem resided in the airplane intersecting his trajectory. The man was quite baffled about the situation already, and the roaring engine approaching him from behind didn't change anything about it.

Especially when it sucked him in.

The man's yell of surprise was quickly drowned in the decibels produced by the plane engine, and the collision of a high-speed turbine and numerous magical items brought forth a spectacular explosion which modified the plane's course dramatically. Devoid of his left motor and half of the corresponding wing, the aircraft plunged to the ground and crashed several seconds later, killing the 141 persons on board.

Harry hadn't had time to react.

One second, he was holding Karkaroff and Powell and heading towards Switzerland, and the next, Karkaroff had taken his wand and disappeared from the gaseous reality. By the time Harry realized where the man was, a distinct explosion occurred nearby. Neither

Harry nor the spy with him felt it, but they heard it and noticed the plane flying to the ground.

While advancing towards the falling airplane, Harry cursed his lack of forethought concerning Karkaroff. He could have tied him in ropes. He could have hidden the man's wand better than that. He could...

He frowned. While wondering about Karkaroff, he had tried to Apparate in the plane to take the passengers out, but it was falling too fast and he had never Apparated in a moving vehicle. On top of that, from what he could see from the gaseous reality, the inside of the plane was chaotic, and he wasn't sure that he would have had enough space to Apparate in.

He still tried until the last moment, and watched the plane crash down in a ball of fire. After a few minutes of watching the disaster site, he went up to where Powell was waiting – the non-magical people couldn't move by themselves in the gaseous reality.

"Let's go." he said grimly, and the man perceived the weight of the young boy's culpability in both words.

A few minutes later, they were both in Geneva and Powell was looking the house with an appreciative whistle. The man quickly remembered what had happened just before, though, and took the armchair opposite to the one Harry had slumped.

"Harry?"

The boy didn't move, his eyes turned towards the empty fireplace and his expression vacant.

Powell decided to continue to speak nonetheless. "Harry, I don't know much about your magic and your habits. I can speak only about mine. I'm a spy, Harry. You know that, now, but perhaps you don't know exactly what it implies, so I'll tell you." He sighed. "I have often protected people and sought the truth, but, a good half of my life, I have done the contrary. I have killed more people that I can count and spread lies which did cost the life of more. Sometimes, there

have been times where, in order to kill a target, I had to place a bomb or "remove its protections" which is a euphemism to say that I had to kill the target's bodyguards. Witnesses weren't spared either, especially when the enemy opened fire as well. I have numerous scars of the numerous dogfights that stain my life. Sometimes I rant on my ex-wives but, at other times, I wonder how I have been able to even marry them in the first place."

He sighed again, his eyes following Harry's to the dark fireplace. "What I wanted to say, Harry, is that there are times, in a man's life, where his actions seem to have consequences, but it isn't always one's fault."

After pausing for a few seconds, he continued in a more subdued voice. "I remember one particular day, when I was much younger. I had to kill a drug cartel leader, and I spared a few guards. Two weeks afterwards, one of them intruded in my house and murdered my first wife before I could kill him." A pause. "She was pregnant at that time, you know. For several months, I played scenarios in my head: "What if I killed them?" "What if I protected my wife better?" "What if...?" I learnt a few things, though."

After several seconds, Harry said something in Latin and the fireplace came to life. "What it is?" the boy asked afterwards.

After the surprise of seeing the fire burst to life instantly, Powell looked at him. "Firstly, asking oneself this kind of questions doesn't bring back the dead. And, secondly, one has to see the guilt where it belongs. I didn't kill my wife. I took bad decisions which led to her death and, for that, I'm eternally sorrowful, but I wasn't the one to shoot her."

Harry nodded silently, his eyes back to the fire. Several minutes passed in silence, and Genevieve entered the room only to see the two of them in the same position. Powell noted that Harry was in better shape, though, and the boy greeted her and introduced the two of them. While speaking and joking good-naturedly, the three of them whipped a proper meal and ate it in front of the fireplace.

Harry and "Maxwell" then retreated to Harry's old bedroom and discussed about the spy's upcoming debriefing to "C", his MI-6 boss; about his retirement; and about his new mission. They also spent the best part of the afternoon burying the man's most delicate secrets under his consciousness building. Remembering the Fidelius, Harry also gave the man the address of the house so that he could find and enter it later.

Quicksilver had been sent from Japan to Switzerland the day before, and Harry introduced the falcon to the spy and vice-versa, to Powell's continued amazement. The boy then briefly explained that it was the best way to reach him in the wizarding world, even if it wasn't to be abused. He also gave him the proper name to write on the letter, as well as a few codes so that interceptors couldn't get the letters' meaning. Through his experience, the spy understood all of this and even added some comments about it.

The day was drawing to a close when Harry left Switzerland.

The second-year students of Gryffindor and Slytherin didn't have any courses on Tuesdays, partly because of the morning rest implied by Monday's Astronomy lessons. However, Harry felt that he still had to be seen for dinner or the teachers would worry about him. After transforming back into Kentaro Anderson, he did so and joined Tracey at the Slytherin table.

‘What was it, then?’ she projected.

‘Well... I found the wizard who found Vernon, but he managed to wriggle free, only to find himself embedded in a plane's engine. It crashed.’

‘Oh... I'm sorry, Harry.’

‘Not as much as I am, but I'm doing better, now. I met a British spy and he accepted to work for me.’

‘Must be nice.’

‘Yes... Well, he isn’t exactly nice, but he told me interesting things.’

‘About what?’

Harry kept silent for a few seconds before answering. ‘About death and responsibilities.’

‘Bummer. I should have kept my big mouth shut. Well... mind-mouth. Sorry.’

‘No problem. You should answer Flint, now: he had been asking the salt twice already.’

Tracey returned to her senses and wordlessly passed the salt to her housemate before returning to her previous discussion. ‘Given that, like the Gryffindors, we didn’t have any classes today, most of the SAGES did their homework before playing outside. Hermione took that as an excuse to dismiss this evening’s session, and I have to say that she expects a full report about what you did in London. You departed quite urgently, last time.’

‘Yes. I was-’

‘Don’t tell me now. I’ll be listening to it twice and you’ll be telling it twice, something I know you don’t like.’

A pause. ‘You know me well.’

‘I sure do, even if I don’t know everything.’ she answered smugly. ‘Now, pass the pumpkin juice.’

The two of them continued to eat, reverting to a voiced discussion between them and with their neighbours.

After the meal, Harry was slowly pushed by Tracey towards the seventh floor. After they walked back and forth in front of Barnabas’ painting, the door to the Room of Requirements appeared in the wall and Harry had the surprise to see all the people who knew his secret congregated there. They were seated in a half-circle, leaving the

middle seat to him, and seemed to be waiting for him. There were Hermione, Ron and Ginny, of course, but also Remus and Sirius, and the Weasley twins as well. And, opposite him, there was a roaring fireplace. An almost-visible sheen of magic was noticeable around the group, denoting a powerful privacy charm.

“Err... Hi, guys.” Harry started, before sitting down. “How are you doing?”

“It should be our job to ask you this, Tiger.” Remus stated, looking at him intently.

“Come on, Moony.” Sirius said. “Let the man talk.” He looked at Harry. “Did you have fun, at least?”

“Padfoot!” Remus exclaimed. “Follow your own advice, will you?”

The byplay wasn't lost on everybody.

“Padfoot?” asked Fred.

“Moony?” asked George.

In the sudden silence, Ginny spoke softly. “Fred, George... meet the Marauders.”

The two addressed teens looked at their sister in shock, before directing their gaze to the two men. They lunged suddenly, and everyone prepared themselves for a violent act, but the two redheads knelt in front of the teachers, hand on the heart.

“It's an honour, really-” Fred started.

“-to be presented to you Highnesses.”

“You have been our idols for so long-”

“-starting even before we... uh...”

“-uncovered-”

“Ah, yes, "uncovered" the map left by you.”

“We’re not worthy-”

“-to be in the presence-”

“-of such wonderful pranksters.”

A few seconds of silence ensued, before the others laughed. Few persons alive could brag about seeing the Weasley twins kneel in front of anyone.

Sirius stood and took a dignified stance. “Rise, our heirs, I beg thee.”

Remus snorted, and the others chuckled, destroying the solemn mood.

“Speaking of map, can I see it?” asked Harry.

Fred took the parchment from his pockets and activated it. He cast a brief glance to it, before giving it to Ginny, who passed it to Harry. The boy looked at the labelled dots on it and noticed his fake name showing. Concentrating on assuming another false name, he saw that his dot had changed name as well. He smiled and gave it back to Ginny before returning to his current identity.

During this, Fred had frowned. “Weren’t you guys four or something?” he asked suddenly.

“Yes, there were four names on the map.” George continued.

“Prongs, Padfoot, Moony, and Wormtail.” Fred supplied. He had activated the map so many times that he knew the names by heart.

“Padfoot would be me, the king of deceit and wicked pranking.” Sirius said, raising his hand, before pointing to Remus. “And here is the esteemed Moony, prince of mischief management.”

“And the two others?” asked George.

“Well... Wormtail turned to the enemy.” Sirius said dejectedly. “It was Peter Pettigrew.”

“But... but...” Fred stuttered, looking between the two men and Harry, the pieces starting to fall into place.

“Harry here got him back, though.” Remus said before turning to Harry. “Thank you, by the way. I’m sure your dad would be happy about it.”

“His dad?” asked George.

“Why, of course.” Sirius said, a malicious glint in his eyes despite his saddened expression. “Prongs. Emperor of practical pranking. James Potter. Harry’s father.”

The silence following the statement could be cut with a knife. It didn’t last long, thankfully, as the twins scrambled at Harry’s feet and vowed him their eternal soul or other titbits. Between their rant, they got the misfortune of saying that Harry was a safer bet to bow to because the Marauders were “kind of retired.”

“Retired?” exclaimed Sirius indignantly. “Who do you think turned the whole school body orange?”

“That was you?” George asked, dumbfounded.

Sirius was deprived from the opportunity to answer by Hermione. “You said Harry got Pettigrew?” she asked, not one to let pass a detail that big. “How?”

Harry then started to retell what had happened, from the point he had left them with. He told how Dumbledore had appeared to the Tower of

London with "friends", and how he had then moved to Windsor. How he had fought, magically and with his sword. How Dumbledore appeared and recovered the cup the Death Eaters wanted. How he went after Pettigrew, and how he brought him back to Dumbledore. He then branched on to the tale of the castle fire and how he found himself in a hospital.

Still leaving details out of the tale, he also recounted that he found that his family's position in Japan had been compromised and that he had successfully healed his uncle and intercepted Karkaroff. He finally told them that the Headmaster of Durmstrang had been killed, causing a plane crash.

Of course, the retelling of the sword fight raised the interest of the people there, for several reasons. Ron and the twins looked impressed, but Hermione was ready to scold him. The retelling of Karkaroff's demise and the obvious guilt behind the death of the plane passengers and crew softened Hermione's reaction but she still started a debate about ethics. Like anyone who had participated once to such a debate knows, it extended late into the night, especially when Ron inadvertently brought Harry's mental powers into the discussion.

Hermione was perhaps outnumbered, but her arguments were logical and she successfully convinced the group. In the end, they all agreed that killing, like mind programming, was sometimes necessary, but the decision, if not provoked by an urgent situation, shouldn't be left to only one person. It all fell under the saying of not being at the same time judge, jury, and executor.

Harry found that the whole discussion clarified his feelings relative to killing the Death Eaters and about the plane crash. Hermione had particularly got through to him by saying that it wasn't because he could change other people's mind that he had all the good answers. When they separated, escorted to their quarters by the two teachers, Harry reflected about all that had been said. In the depth of the night, he almost decided to get rid of a few of his powers, but remembered Voldemort.

Then and there, he took the resolution of actively working towards the Dark Lord's demise before even thinking of discarding any advantage he could have over him.

His tiredness finally got the better of him, and he slept through the night, the breakfast, and the start of the first period. Thankfully, it was a free period again – the schedule of the first and second year students was considerably lighter than the older years – and he had no one to report to.

A week later...

The week had passed without a hitch, except Snape's return. After applying ointments non-stop for a week, the surly man was now able to talk in English most of the time. Dumbledore gave him his position back. By then, all students had got Dumbledore as a teacher at least once, and it had been a pleasurable interim.

When Harry entered the Potion classroom for the first time after the "incident", Snape sneered at him but didn't take points. He actually left him pretty much alone, something which suited Harry. The Skin Restoration Ointment they made that day was intended to refill the Hospital Wing's supplies, and all students understood that Snape himself had needed the balm to cure his skin. It was still rash, but the greenish scales had receded enough so that his mouth wasn't affected anymore. However, now and then, a word in Parseltongue escaped his lips, and he had to repeat the sentence.

It almost revealed Harry's ability to understand the serpents' tongue, though. A few minutes before the end of the class, the Potion Master told the class to stop stirring in order to let the potion cool down before bottling it. Half of his sentence came out in Parseltongue, and Harry obeyed immediately. Thankfully, the man had been looking the other way and didn't notice.

Malfoy did, though.

However, Harry heard the teacher repeat the sentence and quickly noticed that parts of it had been uttered in Parseltongue. He looked around to see if anyone had seen him and only caught Tracey and Malfoy. He knew he could manage with Tracey, but he didn't want

Malfoy to blabber suspicions to Snape – something the blond would be too happy to do right away. Harry entered the blond boy's mind at once, removing the discovery from his immediate memories. Once done, he returned to his own body and followed Snape's directions concerning the bottling of the ointment.

The following week resembled that one except for two little occurrences: McGonagall posted lists of students so the ones wanting to stay over Christmas could indicate their name. The second occurrence happened the Wednesday afterwards. Officially, Remus was still forced to stay away of the castle the nights of the full moon, in order not to show his healed state to Snape and Dumbledore. Sirius wanted his friend to spend an agreeable moment, though, and had invited the group he had dubbed as "The New Generation" in his house for dinner.

During dinner, the conversation rolled on several topics: from Ginny's mane of hair – which was slowly but surely recovering its usual non-flaming state – to a crash course in Theory of Magic. None of the two men were particularly knowledgeable in the latter topic, but they had reminiscences of their studies and offered ideas which Harry and Hermione memorized greedily. For Hermione, it was for the sheer pleasure of learning – and better understanding the world around her – whereas, for Harry, it helped him understand how he had come to be who he was.

They also spoke briefly about Harry's Nahual, Harry and the two teachers asking Hermione if she knew anything about it. She didn't, though, and reverted to a lighter conversation when the twins asked the Marauders why they had referred to Harry as Tiger. They joked for a bit about his assumed forename and Hermione butted in, saying that there was actually a beast with the same name.

Kentaro. Sword and tiger. Sabre-toothed tiger. The Smilodon.

A couple of hours later, around the fireplace, they bantered back and forth about jokes and pranks when Tracey asked Harry what he had done with Malfoy's backpack. The boy shrugged and told the others that it was still in his enlarged schoolbag. Most of them were surprised, since Malfoy hadn't looked as if he actually needed one.

Harry told them that the blond had received a new bag the day after losing his original one. When, prompted for it, he repeated the whole story of how Malfoy's schoolbag had come into his custody, they all burst into laughter.

Hermione frowned, though, and the others prepared for her rant about "respecting the teacher etc." but it didn't come. Instead, she asked Harry if he wanted to press charges against Snape. To his surprised face, she explained – with Sirius and Remus nodding along – that teachers weren't permitted to discipline students using corporal punishments, and that a slap in the face was exactly that: forbidden. Harry sat back in thoughts, reflecting for a couple minutes on ways to get even more even on his current Head of House.

Harry knew that Cassie allowed him to bring people with him, and, soon afterwards, he Apparated the students back into Hogwarts – Sirius and Remus staying at Sirius' place. Even with the portals between Sirius' houses, there wasn't any other way, because the secret passages weren't useable: Honeyduke's, the candy shop from which basement a tunnel lead to Hogwarts, was closed, and the exit at the Whomping Willow wasn't useable either since the entrance doors were shut as well.

The culminating moment of the following week was the Quidditch game between Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. Prodded by Tracey, Harry had continued to send toucans to Susan Bones – although it was only on a monthly basis – and he had used that channel to give the Hufflepuffs hints about Ravenclaws' weaknesses. The message only based itself on past year's data, of course, but it was enough of a start for their team to start building on. Harry had also asked the Brazilian post office for "waiting" toucans, so that the Hufflepuff girl could answer. The first time, the toucan had waited a week and had had difficulties to take off with the folder of mail attached to its legs. Harry had intercepted that one departure, preventing the mail from being lost between Hogwarts and Rio de Janeiro, but he recovered the others at the Brazilian post office. Knowing the Headmaster's compulsion about him, he systematically cancelled magic in the mail, and had the mixed pleasure of seeing the Finite Incantatem encounter a resistance a couple of times – indicating a powerful charm or two.

Susan had started to feel better about Harry's departure, and involved herself in the SAGES. Strangely, it gave her the impression that "Harold" was around her, and she was sometimes caught daydreaming, watching the SAGES inner core discuss or play animatedly. At these moments, it seemed to her that the Slytherin boy replaced Harold quite well. When he caught her doing so, Harry had a hard time deciding whether he should let her mind wander like that or not. Her subconscious was very close to the truth, but Harry shrugged it off: in no way would she consciously admit that Kentaro and Harold were the same person.

As the upcoming game didn't concern the Gryffindor/Slytherin classes, the students from both houses went farther in their work than their excited counterparts. In the last Transfiguration period of the year, McGonagall even finished the stretch of exercises concerning the metals. Thus, as homework for the holidays, she didn't give exercises, opting for an essay on permanent versus temporary Transfiguration. Harry was puzzled, like most of the others: until now, he hadn't heard of anything regarding temporary Transfiguration.

The Quidditch game saw several Hermione-induced tactics fail, and the Hufflepuffs scored a fair share of goals. Ultimately, though, the sheer number of moves researched and practised by the Ravenclaws lost the Hufflepuffs, and the game finished with the score of 360 to 180 for the blue-clad players.

None of them sore losers, the Hufflepuffs congratulated their opponents, and got praised as well for their skill throughout the game. Hufflepuff's new Seeker, Cedric Diggory, was cheered by Renata di Luzio, his Ravenclaw counterpart. By telling him stories of how she was in her first game, the lithe girl made him smile, and the loss was quickly forgotten.

The next day was quite anticlimactic. The Hogwarts Express was leaving on the following morning, and it was the last day of the term. The Quidditch game was still fresh in the students' minds, and several of them rejected Hermione's idea of doing homework.

Strangely, the most vocal student was Neville Longbottom. Hermione relented, finding it strange that the shy Gryffindor could dare speaking

up. She wasn't the only one having that feeling, though, as most of the SAGES heard the timid boy. Even Neville was impressed at himself, and he timidly thanked the few people congratulating him for his "coming out." Seeing Seamus Finnigan patting his friend's back with one hand while absently shuffling a deck of cards with the other, Harry suddenly remembered the one place where Finnigan got on his hands the same thing that Longbottom got in the face.

It had been in the Potion classroom. It had been the two boys' potion mishap following Snape's fall. The situation could have been much worse. The two boys could have been drenched in acid or snake scales, for all he knew. As it was, though, he was quite happy about it.

To be continued in next chapter: The Gift of Memories...

The fire died down slowly,
And Harry travelled quickly,
Would you dare to place a bet:
Is he out of the woods yet?

Chapter 22 – The (Cursed) Gift of Memories

posted November 11th, 2005

The rush to the holiday-headed Hogwarts Express was generally chaotic at best, and resembling a herd of rampaging hippogriffs at worst. Each time, some of the younger students were lost and then recovered by the teachers before the train departed. At 11am sharp, said train would whistle and set off, heading south.

That year's Christmas departure wasn't any different, and the students had barely settled in the carriages when the train lunged forward. Harry found himself in a compartment with Tracey, and with Blaise Zabini and a couple of Slytherin third year as well. With the train on its way, they waited for a few minutes for the compartment reorderings to slow down before doing their own. Several other Slytherins had trickled in, and one of them was having an animated discussion with Zabini, so Harry and Tracey left toward their friends.

They quickly found a compartment with Ron and the twins and settled in. Soon after, Hermione arrived as well, and they started to discuss about their schedule for the holidays. While Hermione was explaining the trip her parents intended to make to France after Christmas, the compartment door opened and they all looked up, thinking it was Ginny – except Harry, of course. The boy was displaying his best scowl when he addressed the intruder.

“What do you want, Malfoy?”

“Why, nothing.” the blond answered smugly, and his bodyguards chortled. “I’m just counting the red heads, and I can’t seem to find the right number.”

Ron stood up suddenly. “What do you mean?” he asked dangerously.

“I mean,” started Malfoy, looking at his fingernails ostentatiously, “that a particularly young and stupid redhead won’t be home for Christmas.” He then summoned his best affected smile. “Too bad for-”

“You lie.” Harry said, interrupting him. At that moment, Ron and the twins had paled but they quickly recovered their proper colours after Harry’s words. “I happen to have seen her in a compartment with Percy and some other Gryffindors. Now get out and stop pestering us.”

“Or what?” sneered Malfoy.

Harry stood up, and walked to the boy until their noses almost touched. “Or I’ll Obliterate you.” he whispered.

Malfoy didn’t like the physical contact, especially with people he perceived as enemies, and he stepped back. “Ha! You’re not an Obliviator!” he retorted. “How could you-”

“I didn’t say Oblivate.” Harry said threateningly, taking another step forward. “I said Obliterate.”

Harry let a small bit of his magic loose and noticed the fear registering in the grey eyes. Pushed backwards by Harry’s presence, Malfoy recoiled, taking another couple of steps back. Once he had passed the threshold, Harry slammed the door shut and drew the curtains as well, before casting several locking and privacy spells.

He then looked around the compartment and cast an unusual spell. Hermione recognized parts of it, though, and inferred the spell’s nature.

“Anti-Apparation?” she asked. “It wasn’t the exact same incantation in the book I read.”

“ Yes.” Harry answered grimly. “It’s only on one half the compartment.”

“Why-”

“Malfoy didn’t lie. Ginny is locked in one of the broom cupboards, and he kept her wand.”

“What are we going to do?” asked Ron.

“You? Nothing.” Harry said. “I’m going there and back. The field is for me to Apparate back safely. I never Apparated in a moving vehicle before.” In a much quieter voice, he added “Not that I didn’t want to.”

After a few seconds of reflecting on the plane crash in China, Harry concentrated on the task at hand and disappeared.

The remaining persons in the compartment exchanged small talk for a couple of minutes, but everyone felt that it was quite disheartened and they quickly fell silent. A few more minutes afterwards, Harry appeared in the compartment in his muggle clothes, seemingly pressed against an invisible barrier, and holding a sobbing red-haired bundle in an overly large Hogwarts robe. As soon as he was properly settled in tangibility, he released Ginny between Hermione and Ron, and they both hugged her.

Between Ginny’s sobs, they learnt that she had been ambushed in a corridor just as she was on her way to the train station. Crabbe and Goyle had grabbed her arms and Malfoy had taken her wand before using the Cutting curse with it to slice through her hair and clothes. They had then chucked her in a cupboard near the Slytherin dungeons and she had been too frightened to call for help. The next thing she had known was Harry opening the door by a crack and giving her his own Hogwarts robes.

That’s when the others noticed her actual state. She was bruised, her hair was a shortened mess, and she was wearing Slytherin robes. Ignoring Ron’s sputtering, Harry transfigured the Slytherin badge into a believable Gryffindor one, before focusing on her hair. Like he had done with his family, he modified it, using small Transfiguration touches so that he wouldn’t damage the whole thing if he mucked up. After a couple of small mishaps, he finally restored the girl’s mane almost to its original state, and she smiled through her tears. Looking at her face gave him an idea, and he finished healing her bruises before explaining the plan to them. While Hermione was frowning despite the circumstances, the Weasleys were ecstatic and nodded earnestly.

Harry's circle of close friends included most of Ginny's family at Hogwarts, and he left her in their care before leaving the compartment in search of Malfoy.

The blond boy was near the head of the train, discussing with a compartment full of Slytherins. "Discussing" here meant that he was actively preaching pureblood bigotry to them again. Harry continued and entered the nearest bathroom where he changed his physical aspect – he had been sure to expand his senses around him to detect anyone looking his way, and there had been no one.

An almost-perfect carbon copy of Ginny Weasley exited said bathroom and slowly walked the length of the carriage. Of course, Malfoy spotted the red-haired Gryffindor girl, and immediately stopped his rant about muggle-loving fools and mudbloods. Wordlessly, he exited the compartment under the curious gaze of the other Slytherins present and, noticing the "girl" entering the bathrooms' enlarged area, he hurried after her.

As soon as he opened the antechamber door, though, he found a wand touching his nose and a very male – although young – voice spoke. "Petrificatus Totalus."

He snapped upright and a hand grasped the front of his robes so that he wouldn't topple backwards. Locking the two of them inside, Harry removed everything from the boy except his underwear, making sure that he was devoid of anything magical before binding him in magical ropes. He then shrunk Malfoy and, extracting one of his Unbreakable-charmed bottles from his schoolbag, he put the boy inside before closing the lid. After piercing said lid – even if he wanted to, he couldn't let the boy die from asphyxia – he chuckled the thing in his bag again.

Harry smiled, then, reflecting about the plan that he had just changed. He initially wanted to bring Malfoy back in Hogwarts and to throw him in a broom cupboard for a few days. He had also wanted to change the blond's memories so that it would look as if he had been Obliviated by Snape in a hurry, the so-called hidden memory being of the Potion Master putting him in the cupboard in the first place.

However, during the walk between the two carriages, Harry had reflected that, Hogwarts being under Dumbledore's supervision, he could never find a valid excuse for Malfoy to be there and on the Express.

Smiling, he concentrated on his physical appearance and, after a couple minutes, he had impersonated Malfoy to the smallest detail. The last thing was his fake mind which he changed in order to assume Draco Malfoy's identity.

So as to resemble the blond boy even more, he also removed his outer layers of clothing, putting them in his schoolbag – he thanked magic everyday for it – and put on Malfoy's. After verifying that he was actually able to use Malfoy's wand, he finally shrunk his bag and put it in his pocket, before heading out. He first went to the compartment where his friends were waiting for him anxiously and, putting the patented Malfoy sneer on his face, he opened it suddenly and stepped inside.

To say that his friends were surprised was an understatement. However, they recovered quickly enough that Ron had his wand out and pointing at him in the next second.

“Out, Malfoy.”

“Stuff it, weasel.” Harry drawled, before breaking into a genuine smile. “Hey, Ron! You almost scared me, mate!”

Shell-shocked, the other occupants looked at him with wide eyes for several seconds and he took advantage of that time to close the door behind him. Unsurprisingly, Hermione was the first to bring the pieces together.

“Harry?”

He grinned. A strange sight on Malfoy's face. “The one and only... although one could say the “many” and only.” He then struck a pose and sneered. “Call me Malfoy, now. Malfoy-Malfoy, even, just

because I'm so infatuated with my own name." he finished in an affected manner.

She smirked but didn't change her line of thought. "What did you do with... him?"

He shrugged. "Put him in a bottle. I need him for some mind-adjusting sessions, or rather..." he amended, seeing Hermione's frown, "mind-healing sessions. Yes, that's it. He definitely had an undetermined illness in his mind and as a professional Healer, I have to take care of him. It's a pity, though. I so wanted to test if he would have made an appropriate ingredient for a Potion of Drawling. Oh well."

At that time, all the others had started to laugh already, and Hermione herself had a full-blown smile on her face.

Harry then looked at his watch – Malfoy's. "Well, guys, I love you and all, but the updated plan involves me playing the act for a couple of days. I'll just warn my parents and get Scales out of the way at the same time, and then I'll go to the slimy-Slytherin-git-Malfoy's compartment. The train's almost there. Oh, and, before I forget..." he fished Ginny's wand out of Malfoy's robe pocket and gave it back to her.

During his stunt with the Malfoy heir, Ginny had gotten a change of clothes from Tracey, and, after having made a trip to the bathroom with her, she was now properly clothed. She took her wand gratefully, but seemed to hesitate, and Harry looked at her enquiringly. He didn't want to invade her mind to know the reason why, but she was broadcasting it and he changed back into himself. Only then was she able to hug him in thanks.

Harry then wrote a few words on a sheet of parchment and took his bird from its cage. After shrinking the cage and stowing it in his pocket, he opened the window and sent his messenger bird away. After dispelling the now useless anti-Apparation field, he smiled to his friends – and they nodded back – before turning back into Draco Malfoy, usual sneer and all. Thankfully, he didn't have to spend too much time in the Snake's compartment afterwards, because, less

than thirty minutes later, the train slowed down and whistled, before stopping altogether.

That's when Harry found that he didn't have a clue about how Malfoy went home. Without excusing himself – a Malfoy, excusing himself? – he returned to the bathrooms and extracted mini-Malfoy's bottle before going to his mind to collect that particular memory.

Tracey had agreed to go to Japan with him again, but he was currently more-or-less stuck in Malfoy's shape. The plan would allow Harry to gain unparallel intelligence on the Malfoys, and Hermione had agreed to ask her parents about keeping the Slytherin girl with them for a couple of days.

After checking that they agreed about it, Harry mentally took his leave of his friends. After a few "polite" words exchanged with Malfoy's group of friends, he activated the portkey taking him "home" and, once there...

...he fell to his knees in pain.

"Draco, Draco, Draco..." a male voice drawled nearby, interrupting the pain curse. "You are late, which is enough to earn my discontentment. I have received reports, too. Your grades are lowering and, despite winning your last Quidditch game, you lost the Snitch. To a Weasley, no less." the man seemed to think for a moment. "We are not satisfied with your progress so far, and I think I will bring that lesson home a bit more. Crucio."

Harry had taken advantage of the short reprieve to look around him. He was in a large study room, with a man looking pretty much like him – in his current shape, that is. Lucius Malfoy. When the man had seemed to think for a moment, Harry had grabbed a stray thought through his peripheral Legilimency, and had hurried in his own mind to disconnect the pain-related connector. He still trashed about, playing his part of the act, but he wasn't in pain anymore.

Once Lucius thought that his "son" had had enough, he lifted the curse and looked at him closely. "This is what you get for disappointing me." he said. "Don't fail again."

Harry nodded, and, after Lucius left, he used Draco's memories to go to "his" bedroom for a nap. Anyways, that's what he made it appear to be. Once in the privacy of the bed curtains, which he charmed to be impervious for anyone but him, he extracted the bottle containing Malfoy Junior and looked at the boy intently. Even if Malfoy had been a pain in the rear from the beginning, Harry better understood where it came from, now. Conversely, it still didn't excuse him from his past actions.

Harry spent the next day quite alone. During this time, he imported a good part of Draco's memories concerning dark activities, whether they were related to the Malfoy heir or not, and stored them in his Malfoy identity. He also removed or modified the original memories so that Draco wouldn't be efficient in these activities. Despite his modifications, he still took care of leaving the boy's mind in apparently the same state as it was before.

As Draco would have done in his stead, he took his meals in the company of the Malfoy elders. They all were silent, and atmosphere was quite cold, his "father" casting hateful glances toward him while his "mother" had her eyes unfocused all the time. Harry took advantage of the meals to change the Malfoy patriarch's behaviour slightly. After that day, Malfoy Senior was going to be more amenable to his own family, he thought afterwards.

Harry also explored the mind of Narcissa Black-Malfoy, his "mother." He quickly understood that she had been "disciplined" many times since her marriage, mostly by her husband, but Voldemort had been the most harmful. Harry did what he could to reconnect the woman's consciousness to the present time, removing harmful memories in the way. Narcissa's mind wouldn't heal quickly, but he thought he had done the best he could, considering the short time he spent there.

One of the last things Harry did before leaving was to explore Malfoy Manor. Especially by following Lucius as he moved around. The man was hunted by the Aurors, and he spent almost all his time in his manor, doing Merlin-knows-what. That's how Harry discovered the private Potion laboratory, as well as the cache for magical artefacts, most of them Dark – the Malfoy elder didn't trust the Goblins that

much and had had this cache even before being thrown in Azkaban. Of course, now that Malfoy was on the run, there was no way he could visit Gringotts publicly anyways.

Making a quick round-trip to Diagon Alley, Harry bought a trunk with numerous protections around it and inside it as well – he knew the things he would store were dangerous. The inside of the trunk was also enlarged, but not in the way trunks were usually: it started as a regular trunk, but, as the shopkeeper said, "there was always space for more." In fact, the trunk adapted itself to its content, enlarging and shrinking its inside as needed. Harry was strongly reminded of similar charms in the inter-house study room at Hogwarts, and wondered if he could learn about the spell. He shook himself quickly, though, and paid for it before leaving. It did cost him a jolly thousand of Galleons, but the result was a trunk where he could store many a thing. It was also charmed with an internal gravity field to allow things like open Potion vials to be stored without being disturbed when he moved the trunk around.

And store things he did. The whole Potion stash went there, quickly followed by the Malfoy family's dark magic items. Harry knew he would have to take some time later, to sort through them. To help him in that endeavour, he also took Lucius' memories that were in relation to the potions – removing them from the man's mind at the same time.

Just before leaving the Manor, Harry changed clothes and carefully finished adjusting Draco's memories of the last two days. He dispelled his Impervious charm on the bed and Apparated out. Hogwarts, at the same time...

"Now, now, Severus, my dear boy..."

Snape growled. "Would you stop calling me like that?"

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled amusedly. "Where would be the fun, then?"

The two men were having tea in the Headmaster's office and had been discussing about the Dark Lord and Harry Potter. Of course,

Snape had sneered half of the time – the other half, he was scowling – and that’s why Dumbledore had scolded him.

“I could recall a life debt, you know.” Snape said suddenly. “It would be worth it, if you never mention the brat to me again.”

The old man looked at his Potion Master thoughtfully for a few seconds. “Would you?” he then asked.

“Of course not!” Snape snorted. “Even if I particularly dislike the name, and even if I find your obsession about him not only useless but detrimental to your sanity as well, I won’t recall a life debt on such a trivial thing.”

“My sanity? I can assure you that I’m in full control of my faculty.”

Snape merely raised an eyebrow at the pun, but didn’t comment, and Dumbledore took another lemon sherbet to suck on silently.

“Still... I don’t like when you call me like that. At least refrain from calling me like that in front of others. I won’t be pleased if you do it again, Albus. Remember Halloween 1981.”

The old man paled slightly, looked down, and nodded, his eyes having lost their usual twinkle.

Without a word, Snape left the old man to ponder on past mistakes and involuntary revelations.

Flashback: November 1, 1981...

The Dark Lord was dead. That was what Snape had told the Order of the Phoenix that morning. The spy had discovered that his Dark Mark had suddenly paled, and, over the course of the night, he had checked with the other Death Eaters, only to find that the Potter house had been destroyed and the Dark Lord had disappeared.

The meeting was a full one, with only the Marauders missing. There had been cheers of victory, and bottles of firewhisky and other liquors

had appeared on the table. Everyone drank heartily, some more than others. After all, with the Dark Lord dead, there wouldn't be sudden calls for Death Eater attacks tonight, and they all felt they deserved to lay back.

Several hours later, they had all left the Headmaster's office, which slowly recovered its usual size and shape. Everyone had drunk, even the old man, and everyone had wanted a toast with him, so he was now thoroughly inebriated, slumped on the desk, and absently looking at his relatively sober Potion Master.

"Why... you'nt like mug-hic!-gles, Sev'rus?" he slurred.

The answer came immediately. "Because they are useless, greedy, and they don't like us."

Dumbledore giggled, a strange sound from the elderly man.

Snape approached him, and saw the opportunity of a lifetime. After casting a Trust-me charm on himself inconspicuously – it was easy since the old man was in that state – he addressed his Headmaster. "Why do you like them? Why do you like muggles?"

"I learnt to." Dumbledore sighed, and emptied his umpteenth glass, which Snape refilled when he was looking away. "I made... a mistake, once. Ev'rybody makes mistakes... you too, Sev'rus." He paused, and looked at his glass inquiringly, as if mentally asking the thing to explain how it was full again. "I forced a muggle to... attack another. I thought... it'd be a game... to see who'd win. The poor student... against the lord."

"What happened?"

"He succ... succeeded. The student. He... killed the... duke."

"And why is it that important?"

Dumbledore looked at him with bleary eyes. "It started... a war. The war that... the muggles call... the Great War. T'was in 1914."

Snape snorted. "No muggle war could be worse to our previous problems with Voldemort!"

The Headmaster had his glass to his lips again and said something unintelligible into it.

The Potion Master had heard the word "death", though. "What?" he asked, lowering the glass from Dumbledore's lips and holding the man's face to look at him.

Weary eyes focused on his. At that point, Dumbledore looked exactly that: a very, very old man – and completely smashed. "There've been... more than 66."

He hiccupped, and Snape snorted. "66 death?"

"No... 66 millions deaths."

The Potion Master gasped at the sheer number, but Dumbledore wasn't finished.

"Soldiers... all over Europe... civilians, too... and wizards. The French and German... wizarding gov'nments... destroyed. Beauxbatons... and Durmstrang... bombed. Indiscriminately. The muggle... artill'ry... they thought that... the ruins they saw... contain'd enemy... sold-hic! soldiers. And... the American wizards... overwhelmed... couldn't contain the Spanish flu... to Kansas... so many deaths... so many..."

Hearing the old man's breathing stabilize, Snape released his hold and the Headmaster's head banged on the table where it rested, snoring quietly.

The enormity of the death toll brought home something into the Potion Master's mind: despite the fact that most of the victims were muggles, the Headmaster was feeling guilty for it. He reflected a bit more, and realized that's why the old man had started taking interest

in them. Before that, Dumbledore had spent 80-or-so years being the usual pureblood wizard, with just an eccentric penchant for Alchemy.

Something else wriggled in the tortuous spy's mind. Snape loved to terrorize people less powerful than him, and, by teaching, he had found the perfect opportunity to do so. However, the Headmaster had received several complaints about it, and had warned him. On top of that, with the Dark Lord now dead, Snape wouldn't have much luck finding a job outside Hogwarts, with his Dark Mark on his arm, even though said mark had faded.

That's where Dumbledore's revelations would play an important part: the spy would blackmail the Headmaster to stay in place! And the rumour so that he wanted the Defence position was the best cover story, since he actually didn't want it. Especially as he knew how and by whom it was cursed.

Diagon Alley...

Harry Apparated in the wizarding alley in Harvey Jefferson's disguise, and he proceeded in purchasing his last-minute gifts for his family and friends, as well as buying several magical Christmas crackers. He then went to muggle London to buy some muggle presents as well. Once done, he went to Hermione's place, still in the adult shape of Tracey's guardian – which the Grangers knew about.

As the evening was nearing, the Grangers invited him for dinner and he readily agreed. The conversation rolled easily and, Hermione being her usual self, they spoke about homework. After a short discussion about the merits of short-term Transfiguration, the meal soon came to an end. Tracey and Harry thanked Hermione and her parents before leaving eastwards. They stopped way before Japan, though. Harry's friends in Switzerland had accepted to travel with him to Tokyo, and he stopped at the Swiss house to pick Powell, Genevieve, Mustafa and Fatima.

Half an hour later, they all landed in the enlarged apartment, and were welcomed by cordial hugs from the people already there. Harry was quickly dragged to their secondary apartment, where Josh and Alison were waiting for him. He silently swore – 'I heard that!' Tracey

sent mentally – and remembered that, without him, they weren't able to enter the apartment because of the Fidelius.

The wizarding couple had been there for a full day, and had pleasantly killed the time by visiting the interesting places around. Once allowed inside the apartment, they immediately started to enlarge the rooms and provide – through conjuration and transfiguration – the necessary additional furniture to host the guests: the apartment's population had doubled, going from 7 to 15 in a few minutes. While they were doing so, Harry innocently asked Alison about his essay for McGonagall, and the two of them exchanged points of view for several minutes.

The next day, after breakfast, Harry unpacked his belongings properly. In the process, he found a few books he remembered he had to read over the vacation and, among them, the old leaflet about Merlin's staff. He remembered the moment he had received it, and blushed in shame: it was last year! Twelve months had passed without him taking the booklet's content into real consideration. He sat cross-legged on the bed, and focused his will on understanding the words written within. It was quite difficult, as the book was written in some sort of an old English language. It wasn't a code or a spell, though, and he slowly started to understand it better. After a first pass in which he merely deciphered the words and sentences used, he started again. The book wasn't thick, but it was still difficult to work, and Harry started it a third time. That time, though, he decided to say the sentences aloud. He didn't know why, but he felt that he would understand better that way.

Completely focused, he hadn't been aware of the time flowing around him or the dark green aura surrounding him. Only when he finished reading the book for the third time did he notice a number of people around him. And one of them had a sword held in his direction!

Moving with unnatural speed, he jumped out of the bed, and absently Summoned his katana. Despite the stranger-than-usual feeling of the sword in his hand, he looked around for any threat. However, when he noticed the face behind the sword supposedly threatening him, his eyebrows shot up. He blinked, suddenly remembering where he was.

“Sensei?”

He suddenly felt very weak and fell forward, unconscious even before falling in the man’s grasp.

Earlier that day...

Tracey had taken her breakfast with everybody, and had played a game of cards with the other kids for a moment. At one point, she had wanted to ask Harry about going outside for a walk, but he had been so engrossed in his book that he hadn’t remarked her, and she had left it at that. Now, though, she was growing restless. And worried.

Harry’s aunt had prepared a large meal for everyone, and Tracey had been sent to collect Harry. In the room, the boy was still bent over the same book and it seemed as though he was reading it aloud. What was even more unnerving was that he was floating a dozen inches from the bed, still cross-legged, and he was surrounded by a deep green halo as well. Said halo prevented any and all contact, and the distraught girl returned to the others to report on the incident.

Tracey looked around, but didn’t find the only two other persons with proficiency in magic: Josh and Alison had taken the day off, and were visiting remote places. The two of them weren’t reachable, and Tracey didn’t know anyone nearby with the slightest connection to magic and to Harry. Except...

She went to the phone and called Goken’s dojo, telling Harry’s instructor about the problem. Less than a dozen seconds afterwards, Goken appeared from thin air, Harry’s relatives barely restraining a gasp at the suddenness.

The man quickly greeted everybody, before following Tracey to where Harry was levitating, and the others tagged along. Once there, they all noticed that the boy’s aura was pulsating in stride with his words. When Harry stopped talking, the deep green halo turned white. Goken, suspecting that touching the boy with the hands was harmful, reacted by unsheathing his katana to reach to Harry.

The boy's reaction startled the assembled people, but him falling unconscious worried them even more. They put Harry back in his bed, where, surprisingly, there was no remain of the book he had been reading. When Goken tried to pry the weapon from Harry's hand, though, they got another surprise.

The katana wouldn't budge.
At the same time, in a concealed location...

"The Lord!" an unseen usher proclaimed, and everyone stood before bowing in his direction.

In a sedate pace, he advanced toward his place at the head table, recognizing and saluting his guests on his way. Dumbledore... the Malfoys... Fudge... the Weasleys... the Zabini's... everyone had answered, and his secretary had notified him of the success of this gathering.

His mind stirred – since when did he have a secretary? Since when-

He returned to the scene at hand, when the numerous people returned to an upright standing position when he stood at his place. La crème de la crème of the wizarding world was welcoming him, at last.

"Welcome, everyone, for this charity Ball I gave for the orphanages of London, graciously hosted here, at the Stockwell institution."

Everyone clapped, overwhelming his feeling of unease. Especially when he spoke about his old "house."

"Let's find the food wonderful and the drinks refreshing."

Despite the insistent nagging feeling, he sat down, and everyone followed suit, sitting down as well.

The waiters removed the plates' covers, and he found his own covered in worms. Seeing that the others had started to eat their splendid dishes, looking at him insistently, he smiled weakly and

forced himself to eat. His feeling of inappropriateness returned full force, but he didn't know what else to do. All his life, he had starved for people's attention, for the wizarding world's attention. Now that he had it, what was a dish of worms? He sure had to accommodate with worse than that in his early childhood.

After the first course, a group of musicians arrived and played music. He looked as couples formed and danced gracefully. The Malfoys had led, but they were now dancing near the border, as if ready to leave at a moment's notice. Dumbledore and Snape were dancing together, the Potion Master leading a visibly reluctant Headmaster. The whole Weasleys family was there, dancing in a circle. The Parkinsons and Zabini had switched partners and were dancing a tango while the other dancers were waltzing around.

Tango? Waltz? He glanced at the musicians... it certainly wasn't a tango or a waltz they were playing. It was more of a requiem. While the realization dawned on him, he remarked a lone figure appearing in the middle of the musicians' half-circle and taking the propped-up microphone with his left hand, his right being taken by a staff.

"Yay, everyone!" the newcomer exclaimed in the device. "Let's rock the house!"

Said newcomer was clad in green robes with silver highlights, and, as he started to sing, his staff began to glow, and multicoloured rays illuminated the otherwise greyish room. He sang horribly, though, forcing the people here to flee the premises. Only a few remained.

The song finished, the newcomer removed his hood, and everyone looked at the well-known face and scar.

"Well, Riddle. Did I rock your boat enough?"

"POTTER!"

The high-pitched scream erupted in the green and silver resting room. It wasn't quite a bedroom since the man didn't need that much sleep anymore. He just needed a night's worth of rest every week. His

weekly rest was interrupted, though, when he finally succeeded in exiting from his nightmare, his current host's body cold and sweaty.

Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters, socializing? Having a Ball? He screamed again, in an inarticulate fit of rage.

The few Death Eaters around their Master's chamber hesitated to enter. They knew about Voldemort's resting cycles and what happened when they were interrupted. Judging from the screams of anger, they were in for a very difficult week.

Bellatrix Black was the highest-ranking of the four guards, and addressed them haughtily. "Stay here. I'll find something." she said, before making a hasty retreat.

It was just in time, though. She knew her Lord and Master, and knew when to withdraw from his immediate vicinity. Such was the time, now, as Voldemort exited his chambers and killed the three recruits in rage, without thinking properly. His rage partly dissipated, he tried to find sleep again, but he knew that he wouldn't, and resolved to spend the week in a grouchy state.

Such was the result of one of the numerous rituals he had undertaken to be more powerful.

Bellatrix was in a side room and was waiting for her master to calm down, when the fireplace came to life and a much-awaited message was given to her. Reluctantly – but able to hide her feelings –, she entered his throne room and bowed submissively, trying to appease Voldemort. He just barely refrained from taking his anger on her, though. She was more than a new recruit, and he needed her.

"My Lord!" she started excitedly, and it revived Voldemort's interest. "Bode has found the artefact!"

"Excellent." 'The week doesn't start that badly, then.' he thought, and almost smiled, before remembering the dream. He took a deep breath and calmed himself. No need to take Bellatrix's life, yet. "Where is it?"

The woman seemed unsure to continue, but she couldn't refuse to answer the direct request. "It's in the Department of Mysteries, my Lord. Bode knows where, but he had been unable to access it. He said that only you could dispel the wards cast around it by the other Unspeakables."

Voldemort frowned. That was good news, even if tainted by the man's inability to get his hands on the thing. Well... fortunately, in fact, as, given the artefact's history, he wouldn't be able to "get his hands" on it without serious retribution.

"Finally..." he whispered. "The power will be mine." His slanted crimson eyes focused on his follower and he addressed her. "Find the tome! And contact our Ministry agents! We are going to plan our way in, and Christmas will be the perfect opportunity..."

"At your command, my Lord." Bellatrix bowed and retreated from her Master's presence.

Once alone, the Dark Lord's eyes became unfocused again, and his features acquired a greedy look. "Finally..."

All the previous problems faded before the beauty of an almost-accomplished quest. Voldemort forgot about the Malfoy's minds he had had to rewire properly. He forgot about Snape's reports, and about his followers' failure to get him the Goblet of Fire and the Crown Jewels. He almost forgot about his nightmare. 'Soon.' he thought. 'Soon, the snake goddess will wake and I'll rule them all.' In Japan, several hours later...

"I don't know what it is, Alison, and I didn't know how to react. Perhaps I could have done something? Perhaps it's my fault if he's in that state... Perhaps-"

“Calm down, Tracey. You’re not to blame. If what Goken told me is correct, there is nothing you could have done. Heck, I’m not sure I could have done something myself. I-”

“Hey, he moved! Harry? Can you hear us?”

Harry groggily awoke, feeling someone holding his left hand while his right was still... holding his katana.

“Ungh...” was his first sound, his eyes still closed. “What... What happened?” he croaked.

“That’s what we want to know.” a male voice said.

Harry looked up and noticed the anxious faces of his family, as well as his slightly angry katana teacher. “Goken? Sensei? What are you-?”

“Why I am here?” the man asked, obviously working up a rant. “Tracey called me because, and we all noticed it, you were doing some unexplainable magic.”

“But... Alison...” the boy started.

“I wasn’t there at that moment, Harry.” the young woman answered, almost apologetically. “I came back only this evening.”

“Evening? But I only read a book this morning, and-”

“It seems that your reading went well into midday, and you activated God-knows-what magic before falling unconscious.” Goken stated. “For eight solid hours. And it seems that, whatever magic you invoked, it has something to do with your sword.”

“My sword?” Harry enquired, before registering that his katana was still held firmly in his hand. He tried to open his hand, but it was to no avail.

Fragments of the book came back to his memory, and he started to understand.

...I have imbued this book with the essence of the ritual I undertook with my walking staff, and it will affect the next staff you'll hold in your hand...

...conversely, any straight length of material will do finely. My dearest friend did so with her dagger...

...the aim is to provide a solid magic focus to cast spells, sturdier than those frail twigs...

...the last steps, achievable anytime, will be to spread powdered diamond dust on the staff and the hand holding it, before plunging it in the elements' heart...

...and, in order to establish the magic link, thou shan't relinquish thine quarterstaff for the whole duration of a year's time...

...spell strength gradually increasing, but if you lose the staff, magical backlash could be harmful, that's why I included a Sticking charm in the ritual...

...thou can change its shape for times when such weaponry is unwelcome, but it must be temporary, so as to retain its properties...

He started to smile, but Goken burst his bubble quite quickly.

“Why do you smile? Does it amuse you that we spent the whole afternoon worrying about you? You didn't even warn your family about what you were doing! You could have died, for all we know! And we'd be hard-pressed to explain it, since you didn't warn anyone!”

Harry blushed and looked around. They were all frowning, with a mixture of worry and relief etched on their faces. He hung his head in shame. What had started as a light reading had finished in a ritual ages old and it was true that he hadn't taken the appropriate

measures to warn his family about it. What Goken said was true, and he couldn't find excuses about it. Form required that he did, though.

"I'm sorry." he started meekly. "I'm sorry to have worried you. Especially for so long. I just couldn't tear my eyes from the book, and, by the time you came, I had just finished it."

"A book? What book?" asked Goken, still irritated.

Harry looked around, frowning. The book wasn't there anymore, and he remembered a blinding flash when he finished reading it. He sighed. "It was the book I received last Christmas. I guessed that it was linked to the wand."

"Which wand?" Alison enquired. "We know you have more than one."

He blushed and mumbled something unintelligible. Prodded by the woman, he looked up. "Merlin's. The book was from him, and it contained a ritual to create a wizard's staff."

They all gasped, even if only three of them understood the thing better than others.

"Wizard's staff, huh?" asked Goken, looking pointedly at Harry's katana.

The boy shrugged. "As it said, any kind of staff will do." A memory demanded his attention, and his gaze unfocused suddenly. "I remember using my katana as a cane, once, because I was wound-

He stopped abruptly, and looked sheepishly at the darkening face of Goken.

"WHAT?"

"Well, you taught me how to fight, right?" Harry retorted. "There were those dark wizards and they wanted some relics of some sort."

“The Crown Jewels.” added Tracey absently, before slapping her hand to her mouth.

“The Crown Jewels?” Vernon asked. “The Crown Jewels? How comes we haven’t seen that on the news?”

Harry looked up and summoned his bravery to answer. “Because I was there, and they didn’t succeed.” He fell silent for a few seconds before adding “It was a bloody mess, though.”

“Harry James Potter!” Petunia scolded him. “Language!”

He glanced at her and smiled wearily. “It’s the truth. It was bloody.”

They paled, and looked ready to scold him for his recklessness again, but Tracey had lunged to his neck and hugged him. A hug he awkwardly returned, since his right wand was still holding his katana.

“Can we speak about something else?” he asked, and his stomach rumbled, bringing smiles to most of the onlookers.

“Very well.” Goken said grudgingly. “Like how you are going to live with the sword attached to your hand like that.”

Harry smiled and looked at Alison. “That’s where a bit of memory sharing could be helpful.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

Harry reminded her of their discussion about temporary transfiguration, and she accepted to give him some of her memories. Besides knowing about it, though, she had only little experience with it, and Josh proposed that he give Harry his memories about the topic. Fetching the man’s voluntarily proposed memories, Harry had the surprise of receiving several others at the same time. It seemed that Josh wasn’t as precise as a few other people in the domain of mind’s arranging. Contemplating the new memories, Harry blushed, before smiling. It was so pranking material...

The others filed out, and, after removing Ravenclaw's ring from his right index finger and put it on his left, Harry used it to temporarily transfigure his katana into a plain albeit wide ring, sitting where Ravenclaw's ring used to be. Even though the Founder's ring hadn't left his hand for weeks, he had decided to put it on his left hand so that it wouldn't perturb the magic linking with his staff-katana-ring – which he decided to call Merlin's: Merlin's ring, in that shape. Stowing his wand away, he sighed and flexed his fingers before heading out for the evening meal.

Christmas was lovely. They had invited Goken as well, and everyone had gone to the mall a last time for a last-minute present hunt.

Even though there were more people that year, the gifts were as inspired as ever. Everyone had gathered in the enlarged lounge, and presents were exchanged – and their wrapping torn open – in joy. From Harry, Genevieve received a magically-updated directory. It wasn't that the young woman was the kind of losing her head, but Harry had added the address of a certain British doctor. He felt that the two of them would appreciate each other and perhaps build a friendship on this. And perhaps more.

Another interesting gift was Powell's to Harry: the now-officially-retired spy had offered him a few pieces of equipment from the MI-6 quartermaster's supplies. While none were as obviously deadly as a gun – Harry already had Jorg's Walther P88 anyway –, some could incapacitate or kill people rather quickly. They were offered in a sturdy and locked glass case so that the other kids wouldn't play with them unknowingly. Especially since some of them looked like everyday items. Powell also knew, from an earlier discussion with Jorg, that Harry's school was disturbing electronics, and he had taken care of only selecting mechanical ones. Not wanting to be interrupted by the older ones' probable scolds, the spy offered a memory to Harry, and the boy quickly understood the deadliness of each of the items.

There were a few explosive-filled ballpoint pens, with a rather impressive explosive power if the man's memory was something to go by. A couple of lighters had the additional effect of releasing an incapacitating gas, either slowly and unobtrusively or quickly –

through a small explosion. There were also two unidentified... things... and a leather container, looking like a bizarrely shaped pouch.

Aided by the man's memories, Harry understood that the "things" were oxygen reserves and filters, useable in any environment where one couldn't breathe – water or gas. Not wanting to disappoint the man, Harry didn't tell him that a charm already existed in that regard – it was the Bubble-Head charm, which created a bubble of air around someone's head, allowing the person to breathe. Still, the gift could be useful in environments where magic was going to be detected otherwise. Finally, the leather container held a binoculars able to zoom up to 20 times and which had a built-in infrared vision mechanism. As far as Harry knew, that last functionality didn't exist in the wizarding omnioculars.

During and after the wild gift-opening session, a feast-like breakfast was held in the room. Harry had surreptitiously added the wizarding crackers to the decoration, and Goken was the first to open one – he hadn't been the first to open a Christmas cracker, but was the first with the misfortune of choosing a wizarding one.

The deafening cannon-like sound frightened everyone, but they quickly realized what it was, and, when they noticed the... thing... that was in the cracker, they laughed and lunged to the other silver-wrapped cylinders. After the successive booms, and after the multi-coloured smoke cleared, each of them displayed their findings more or less proudly.

Goken had a pointy hat with a stuffed vulture on it, and everyone insisted that he put it on. He grudgingly accepted, but removed it quickly as soon as he noticed that Petunia was taking snapshots of everything. There were other hats around, but none as impressive as Goken's. Ulrike and Petunia found, much to their dismay, that their crackers yielded a couple of live white mice. Jorg had a small wizarding chess set, and started to discuss about it with Josh, while Alison was trying to catch a Chocolate Frog which had escaped the twins. The wizarding "delicacies" were passed around, and everybody laughed when Vernon spat his sock-flavoured Bertie Bott's Every Flavour bean disgustedly. There were also wizarding balloons

and other Christmas paraphernalia which were floating and glowing in miscellaneous colours.

Sure, trolls and witches on a broom were more seen during Halloween, in the muggle world, but, with four wizards there – five if you counted Goken – the setting wasn't much more unnatural than what they were used to.

At the same time, somewhere around London...

Cornelius Fudge woke with a start. Someone was calling for him from the downstairs fireplace.

“Who dares waking up the Minister?” he growled, trying to ignore the incessant calls and return to sleep.

It was to no avail, though, as the desperate voice continued to call. The Minister of Magic rose from his bed and donned a robe, putting his wand in a pocket.

“What is it, Thurlow? Why do you wake me in the middle of Christmas night?” he asked the Ministry employee there.

“Minister! There are... Death Eaters... in the Ministry! I had-”

“Preposterous! They wouldn't dare invading my Ministry, and we all know Christmas is a time of peace.”

“It's true, I swear! I had just enough time to Apparate to my apartment to warn you. You have to-”

Fudge was angry, and he lashed out. “Nobody tells the Minister what to do! Nobody! You are fired, Thurlow, and get out of my fireplace before I shut it off, taking your head with it!”

“But...”

“Enough!” Fudge yelled, before taking his wand. “Finite Incantatem!”

Thurlow had just enough time to recognize the spell and retreat, and only a few locks of hair were cut off his head. He sat down in front of his fireplace, stunned by the Minister's reaction. At the same time, a few popping sound were heard around him, and he looked around to see a mixture of people: two colleagues and three Death Eaters. All five with their wands raised.

He wasn't an Auror. He was just a Ministry employee. He wasn't trained in fighting.

He screamed, much before the first spell hit, and stopped only when a green beam struck him.

The five people there popped out and returned to where they came from.

"Everything alright?" Malfoy asked. He had been waiting for them at the Ministry Apparation Point and had shut it down after their arrival.

"Yeah." Crabbe answered. "He screamed like a little girl." he said with a wicked gleam in his eyes.

"You have the hair?"

"Yes."

"Good." the blond man said, taking the proffered locks. Taking a vial from his pocket, he dropped the hair in it before giving it to Crabbe. "Take this now. There's only fifty minutes before his end of shift and I don't want to raise more attention than necessary."

The large man did so, grimacing at the taste before being transformed into Thurlow. He then followed the two "colleagues" into the Ministry, resuming their interrupted rounds.

Malfoy smirked, and gestured to the remaining Death Eaters to follow him.

They walked for a long time – the Department of Mysteries was maze-like and quite extensive – before reaching the advanced Death Eaters sentries guarding the room where the Dark Lord was. In said room, Voldemort was chanting in long-dead languages, and gesturing toward a pedestal, or rather, toward what was on the pedestal.

It was a box. A "mere" wooden box of one cubic foot. Thanks to the Dark Lord's ritual, though, the Death Eaters noticed that many layers of protection had been added on and around the box, these layers being slowly removed by Voldemort.

There was also a sign on the box. It was an eye with two legs. Or rather a leg and a curved tail.

As soon as the last protection and alarm spells were disabled, Voldemort approached the box and took it in his hand. "At last..." he said, almost reverently. "The key to the fortress of Wadjet..." he looked at his followers and raised the box in the air. "Let us leave this wretched place, my faithful followers! It's only a matter of time before the world is ours... I have the Eye of Ra!"
Later, in Japan...

Harry Potter woke with a start. He had made a strange dream, where Voldemort was walking in a pyramid-filled desert under a strange sun which looked like an eye. He checked his connection to the Dark Lord, but didn't feel anything, and reflected that the snake-like spirit of a man was too far for him to feel anything special. Turning around, he went back to sleep.

In the week after Christmas, Harry went to Switzerland to return his Swiss friends to their duties and to make a short trip to the magical mall. There, he bought powdered diamond dust from the local apothecary and then applied it on his blade and his hand. He then sought the four elements "hearts" as Alison had told him while she had stayed in Japan. The result of their brain-storming was that Harry needed the purest form of the elements for his staff to be the most efficient, and Harry had spent a couple of hours on the phone, and another couple of hours chatting with Copycat thanks to Jorg, to get the appropriate information – of course, the "talk" with his alter ego had included a large part of catching up.

Earth went first, and he plunged his blade in the rich soil of the Amazon forest. He then Apparated in the middle of a tropical twister to repeat the action with the Air element. The Fire was dealt with by going inside a blast furnace through the gaseous reality and carefully Apparating only the blade there. And he finally found the water element in a pure source of Tibet, in the Himalayan mountain range. Thanks to Apparation, and because he had searched for the appropriate places beforehand, he was able to complete everything in a few hours, returning home for the evening meal.

What he didn't know, though, was that Merlin himself hadn't been able to find elements that had that level of purity and with that time frame. Blast furnace and precise meteorology hadn't been available at that time, and, even if they had been, Merlin's wooden staff wouldn't have survived the encounter with the fire, and Apparation hadn't been researched yet.

Harry's "staff" was going to be very powerful.

His first inkling of the staff's power was when he cast his first spell after the "elemental baptism." It was a small Cleaning charm to take care of the lunch's dishes, and he felt strange the moment the words escaped his mouth. Thinking that the only focus he had to cast spells was Ravenclaw's ring on his left hand, he hadn't concentrated on specifying the direction of the spell, and it went through both hands, escaping through the Founder's ring on the left, and his transfigured ring on his right. The left hand had been aimed at the dishes, but the right wasn't aimed at anything, and the ring didn't have a shape indicating a direction. The result was a powerfully amplified spell bathing the whole apartment, cleaning everything where it was.

After the first moment of surprise, Harry quickly understood that he was going to have control issues later on. His last hope at controlled magic being the difference between his hands, he focused on the left and tried a weak-willed levitation spell on a nearby napkin. Fortunately, the piece of tissue rose slowly, as expected from a student his level.

Sitting down with a frown, he tried to understand what was happening. His memories being what they were, he quickly found an explanation, but it was overwhelming in itself. The ritual he had unconsciously invoked by reading the book aloud was made to transform a regular staff into a spellcasting focus, and he had Summoned his katana right afterwards, unintentionally choosing it for the task. He didn't know why, but he knew that his katana already was a focus, especially since the Windsor battle, where the shielding spell had been inadvertently – and fortunately – duplicated on his blade. Thinking a bit more about it, he reflected that each magical focus had a magical creature part in them, that part sometimes being the creature's blood itself, and he clearly remembered declaring his ownership of the Samurai weaponry by dropping blood into them. 'Is my blood useable to make wands?' he silently wondered.

His reflection about his ring was almost finished, but his thoughts seemed to have a will of their own and he remembered how he had Summoned his katana. Still sitting at the kitchen table, and still thoroughly focused on his inner self – thus ignoring the surprised gazes around him – he concentrated on his tanto. After a couple seconds of adjustment to the differences between the little blade and his katana, the requested weapon appeared in his left hand. He looked at it, almost in wonder, and decided that it was even better than customized scabbards hanging everywhere on him. Especially as long tachis were particularly difficult to draw efficiently when using regular scabbards.

The concept of scabbards in mind, he decided to try if he could stow the tanto away and concentrated on the dagger's place in the wooden box. After several seconds, the dagger shimmered out, and Harry smiled. He stood up and, extending his hand, repeated the action with each of his weapons, one at a time – except his katana, of course. Each time, the move was swifter and more controlled. After the long blades, he finished with the bows. The last one still in hand, he frowned. Goken hadn't given him any arrows, and he didn't know where he would buy that.

He looked up, and noticed that Tracey was looking at him appreciatively, while his cousins were in awe. Petunia and Ulrike were worried, but they hadn't stopped him and he guessed they

weren't that worried. Playfully, he aimed the longbow at Tracey and drew the string before freezing.

An arrow had appeared.

Harry carefully took the arrow off the string and examined it. It looked like a normal arrow, but he knew it hadn't been there before, and there were few explanations for that, the most obvious being that the bow itself conjured them. Focusing on the weapon, Harry slowly drew the string a second time. The moment the arrow appeared, he noticed a spike of magical power in his reserves, and understood where the bow was taking the arrow-creation energy from.

He smiled. "Well... I just found some interesting stuff."

"No shit, Sherlock." James whispered.

Petunia was too engrossed in Harry's previous actions to react to her son's language.

At the same time, in Egypt...

Bill Weasley looked at his new employer. The large man, insisting to be called Sir Rudolph, had needed a professional curse-breaker, and had specifically asked the Goblins for a human. He hadn't said so, but Bill sensed that the man wasn't the kind to like non-human beings. Sir Rudolph had paid the Goblins a hefty sum to hire him temporarily. Not having much choice short of leaving the field altogether, Bill had reluctantly accepted and was now working in a subterranean complex below the ruins of the old city of Buto, 60 miles east of Alexandria.

He didn't like his employer. The man was constantly on his back, surveying his work. As if he didn't trust him. Or as if he was ready to curse him himself.

After several days of deciphering the long-lost written language and countering ages-old curses, he finally found himself at a dead end. He frowned. His detection spells told him of an immense power behind the slab of wall, but the hieroglyphs there didn't make sense, as if something was missing.

He turned around to admit his defeat, only to find his employer's wand aimed at him.

"Looks like we found it, my Lord." the man said, obviously not addressing him.

"Yesss... I feel it already..." a voice hissed, and a ghostly spirit slithered toward Bill and the wall. "Put it already, Rodolphus!"

"Master, what about... Weasley?" Rodolphus Lestrangle said, contempt dripping from the last word.

All his professional life, Bill had countered curses, seldom fighting humans, and he started to panic.

"You know I'm not allowed to kill him or I'd be persona non grata at Gringotts." Lestrangle continued.

"Very well. Just open here and Obliviate him outside."

As the man approached the wall, Bill saw his chance to flee. He didn't go far, though, as a Stunning curse impacted his backside.

Rodolphus Lestrangle then fished the stolen box from an enlarged pocket and opened it. As his master before him, he marvelled at the orb's beauty, before setting to work. Not daring to touch it, he levitated the sphere until it fit between the ancient glyphs.

The stone wall rippled, as if it was made of water, and the orb settled itself deeper, losing its inherent light in the process. It was now a dull onyx-like stone in a regular wall.

"What now, my Lord?" asked Lestrangle.

"Let me think, let me think." Voldemort answered absently. "The book said that, to open a door, one has to reach the key..." he trailed off, his disembodied hand reaching for the embedded stone.

To Lestrangle's surprise and shock, Voldemort's shape was suddenly surrounded by a dull green light for a second, before disappearing. A couple of seconds later, Voldemort reappeared, and he was... smiling. A truly unnerving sight.

"Take Weasley out of here." he said. "And gather our followers. All of them. Bring them here in two days' time."

Lestrangle nodded, and Voldemort touched the stone again, disappearing instantly this time.

A couple of hours later, Bill Weasley was in his office at the Egyptian branch of Gringotts, wondering what he had done in the last couple of weeks, and how fifteen days of work could have earned him two years' worth of salary.
At the same time, in Japan...

The remainder of holidays went smoothly. Another feast was prepared and served for the New Year, with many crackers opened and games played. After two days of rest, Harry and Tracey took their leave and headed back to London. It was Sunday, and the Hogwarts Express was waiting for them at King's Cross station.

On the platform, they found their friends, and the ones having received gifts thanked the ones having sent them. Everyone wished another a happy new year, and they quickly headed to the compartments. Harry and his "circle" of friends quickly found an empty compartment, and settled there – except the Weasley twins, who went with Lee and the rest of the Gryffindor Quidditch team.

On the long ride, they caught up with what each of them had done during the holidays, and were only interrupted twice, one of these being Seamus and Neville coming to discuss about their holidays as well. The two boys seemed uneasy, and Harry's peripheral Legilimency gave him the reason. They wanted to say something to Ron, about how Neville was surer of himself, and how Seamus was more agile with his hands, but they didn't want to speak about this in front of people from other Houses, and Harry let the matter drop. They then played a few games of Exploding Snap, and Seamus won

only half of them – Harry making sure that the others had a chance by disturbing the Irish boy's play.

As the train was nearing Hogsmeade, Neville and Seamus left for their compartment, and Harry had the mixed displeasure of seeing Malfoy's bodyguards at the compartment's door. Strangely, though, the blond boy wasn't there with them. Behind the closed door, Crabbe merely gestured in their direction and laughed with Goyle before leaving.

When the train stopped, though, Harry quickly understood why the two Slytherins had "merely" gestured and departed: when Ginny tried to open the door, it was stuck!

Hermione reacted immediately, trying the unlocking spell, but it was to no avail. Harry tried as well, but the door wouldn't budge. The bushy-haired witch then suggested a simple dispelling hex, and Harry complied, putting a good deal of power behind it. As it didn't work either, he decided to just evade the problem and, after telling his friends to hold hands and waiting for them to do so, he Apparated the group out of the compartment. Once outside, he noticed stains on the door and a broken vial on the ground and supposed that it was Crabbe's handiwork, while he couldn't establish how it worked.

When they entered the Great Hall, each of them going to his or her House table, Harry noticed two things: Malfoy wasn't there either; and Crabbe and Goyle were dumbfounded, no doubt because they thought Harry and his friends would be stuck in the train. Harry and Tracey sat at their usual place at the end of the table, with Wendy and Adrian. While the Chasers shared light talk, Harry probed Crabbe's mind. He wanted to know why the usually lumbering Slytherins had acted this way. He didn't find much, though: the boys' fathers had given them the vial, explaining that they only had to smash it on a door for it to be physically stuck. They had also been ordered to use it on Malfoy's natural enemies, as a retaliatory strike.

Harry almost dropped his fork in shock. If Crabbe and Goyle senior talked like that, it mustn't have been because Malfoy senior had told them to. The blond man's mind had been only slightly changed, but

Harry was sure he wouldn't obsess about his son's schooling anymore. Unless...

Harry shuddered at the implication. Had someone undone his handiwork? He only knew of three persons able to do it, two of them currently sitting at the Head table, and one of them wouldn't want to.

Whatever the case, the Slytherins were devoid of Malfoy for the time being, and Harry decided to enjoy his studies while it lasted. He even took the time to dispel all the curses and jinxes in his dormitory.

During the two following months, no extraordinary event happened in school. Even Snape seemed completely subdued. Harry would understand why only later, much later.

On the first Transfiguration period, the second year students handed their essays back to McGonagall, who in turn told them about their schedule for the rest of the year. Hearing that they were going to have an introduction about organic transfiguration, Harry looked up, surprised: he hadn't known that such a thing existed. Reflecting about it, he came to the conclusion that it could be extremely interesting, as it would allow him to completely and physically alter people's appearance – not only the hair – without a fading and detectable illusion spell. Deciding to learn the most about that as soon as he could, he shamelessly took a few Transfiguration-related memories from Garnet's mind – he knew the sixth-year prefect was good.

Harry had decided, during the holidays, that he'd spend his Sunday mornings out of Hogwarts, meeting his family and friends. The first of his trips was spent in Japan, relaxing with his family. While he was there, he decided to try his hand in organic transfiguration and, after asking Quicksilver about it, he changed the bird's feathers black. Harry wasn't sure about it, but the bird liked the change, and it flew out to try its new camouflage outside. Since Quicksilver was looking different than before, Harry reflected that it could be used safely for his parents to send messages to Hogwarts, and he told them so.

In the late Japanese afternoon, he took his leave and went to Geneva to meet Powell. The spy had given him a meeting point in the town, and Harry, reaching the place, looked around in surprise at the pub's

dingy state. He quickly found the man, and the two of them started to discuss the previous week when the outside world came crashing in again. A small man unceremoniously pushed his way across the room, disturbing the other customers as he went. Powell's nose was vigorously pushed into his hot espresso, with the result of dirtying the spy's jacket and pants. Sputtering, Powell shot up to address the offender. He had to look down to do so.

"Hey! Watch it, Shorty!"

The other man stopped suddenly, and turned around slowly. Harry noticed that, at the table where he had been heading, the other customers had paled. Surely, that wasn't the kind of man to appreciate being called names.

"You repeat it in my face?" the man asked, leaning threateningly.

"Of course, Shorty. I said "Hey! Watch it, Shorty!" Look, I don't want to intr-"

The spy's rant was interrupted by the apparition of a gun in the man's hand. A short but obscenely large gun. The few whispers that had continued since the clash started had now ceased.

"Look, amico mio," the man started, poking a finger at Powell's suede jacket, "I don't think your filthy coat even deserves my cartuccia, so, with your friend here, you will leave and never come back. Capisce?"

Harry looked at the bullying man in disbelief, before focusing on his mind. 'Muggle. Sicilian. Fugitive? How interesting...' he thought, before acting on his findings. He first removed the man's compulsion to kill, and then implemented a few orders for him to return to his home island. He then went back to his own body and pulled at Powell's sleeve.

"Let it go." he said. 'I'll clean it magically later.' he mentally added.

"But..."

‘He will be taken care of, don’t worry.’ Harry added, and, truth be told, the man he now knew as Salvatore Riina gathered his posse and headed out. Five days later, he would be arrested by the Sicilian Carabinieri, after three decades spent as a fugitive.

Harry and Powell went home, and, when they separated, right before lunch, the spy had a new identity, a carefully transfigured face, and an equally carefully transfigured passport to reflect both. He had work to do with the CIA.

The following Sunday mornings, Harry continued to regularly meet his family and friends, and sometimes both – taking Genevieve or Mustafa (or both) from Geneva and bringing them to Japan and back. One of these times, Genevieve even told him that Rupert, who had been a steady and friendly pen pal, had come to visit her once.

At least twice a month, Harry also went to Goken’s dojo to train his swordsmanship or his archery for a few hours. And he also spent at least an hour each month, discussing with his computerized alter ego.

During his weekly visits, he also read the muggle newspapers – which weren’t available at Hogwarts – and shuddered at the numerous disasters striking the planet. However, whether it was of natural causes like the Great Blizzard striking the eastern United States of America, human causes like the Waco killings and subsequent fire, or unknown ones like the sunken ferry in Haiti, he couldn’t do anything. The numerous bombs that exploded already and that would continue to explode that year – Bombay, New York, Florence, Warrington, London – would also stir his will to fight evil. However, he would also realize that he didn’t have all the cards in hand, yet.

Perhaps, if he taught instead of being taught, he could be of a greater help to reshape the young minds... like he had done with the Slytherin first and second year students already, but on a greater scale.

When he was at school, Harry spent most of his free time with the SAGES, even if he didn’t really need the study sessions. He used this

time to discuss with the others, explaining some concepts behind Transfiguration, his major subject now. It was through these discussions and the eventual games played by the group that he confirmed Neville's increased self-confidence and Seamus' dexterity. Contrarily to the snake skin and Parseltongue ability Snape and Malfoy had displayed, the effect of the two Gryffindors' potion mishap seemed to be permanent – perhaps because it hadn't been "cured" by Madam Pomfrey.

The first Quidditch game after the holidays, pitting Gryffindor against Hufflepuff, was dubbed "the show-off game" as the Gryffindors used their brilliant tactics against a team who didn't have one. The badgers fought valiantly, sure, but their straightforward play often found several obstacles in their way. After yet another brilliant chase, Ron Weasley grabbed the Snitch, and the red-and-gold players won 350 to 60.

Incidentally, the game brought home the need for the Slytherin team to find another Seeker. After a few tryouts, the whole team voted and decided to put Blaise Zabini in that position. In the same vote, they had also decided to elect Harry as Captain. Towards the new Captain, Zabini was also better disposed than Malfoy, and the practise sessions went better than with the blond ponce.

Winter was slowly turning into Spring, and Harry sensed a faint feeling of anticipation at the eve of the equinox. As he was in the middle of a Quidditch practice, he thought that he was just eager to play next week's game against Ravenclaw and pushed the feeling to the side. When the practise was finished for the day, he felt elated, and dismissed the feeling for the same reason.

He was wrong, though.
In Egypt, a bit earlier...

Voldemort had quickly taken possession of the place.

By touching the embedded Eye of Ra, he had been judged by the power in it. The few seconds during which Lestrage had seen him glow had passed like days in some sort of a trial to see if he was worthy of entering the Fortress of Wadjet. He had passed, and the

control of the subterranean place had been given to him. It was truly an impressive place, with snakes decorating each and every wall.

It was a temple, made to worship Wadjet, the Egyptian goddess of snakes.

There were living quarters for hundreds of acolytes, as well as large rooms for a dozen priests and an impressive suite for him. There was even a library, although the rolls of papyrus there were extremely fragile, on top of being written in hieroglyphs. There was some lab which could easily be converted to a Potion Laboratory.

After bringing his Death Eaters there, the Dark Lord had focused on taking possession of the magic in the place. Few instructions remained of how it was done, and a great deal of time was spent carefully translating the papyruses onto more durable books. Even with magic, it took the assembled Death Eaters two months to achieve that. In the meantime, Lestrage had established a permanent portal between the temple and the basement – or other hidden places – of several prominent Death Eaters' manors.

Once the research completed, Voldemort found out that the temple activation ceremony was yielding more power when done during a cosmological event, and he chose the upcoming equinox.

That Saturday, all his Death Eaters, including the three Malfoys, had been clothed in Wadjet's ritual garb – nothing but a greenish leather belt representing a snake – and gathered in the ritual chamber. Voldemort was still in his spirit form, and his faithful snake, Nagini, was reared up behind him.

"My faithful followers." he said, before intoning in a solemn voice. "You are here to witness the reawakening of the serpent goddess..."

It was the start of a ceremony which lasted a couple of hours, during which the Dark Lord spoke and hissed, occasionally answered by his followers. Throughout the rite, the temple's energy had drifted toward the chamber, gathering in a greenish ball. As it slowly increased in size, the Death Eaters could see that, in fact, the ball looked very much like a coiled serpent.

When the ritual was completed, the balled serpent uncoiled suddenly and lunged towards Voldemort. As he was still in his spirit form, though, something unexpected happened: it passed through him and struck Nagini. The Dark Lord screamed in pain, as his essence was swallowed in the beam of green light heading toward his snake.

As soon as the energy beam touched it, Nagini began to twitch, and strange things happened in front of the startled Death Eaters. Over the next fifteen minutes, the snake underwent a visibly painful process of morphing into something... else.

When it was done, it slowly reared up again and looked at the assembled humans, who gasped. Half of the process had been hidden by the altar, when Nagini had coiled itself behind it. Now reaching eight feet in height, it was even more impressive. Its lower body was still a snake's, but the upper part was definitely human, despite being entirely covered in greenish serpent scales. The face retained a snake aspect, though, with pointy fangs and no hair. It looked at its hands and flexed them experimentally, before noticing the assembled Death Eaters.

"Bow to your massster!" the thing that was now Voldemort barked in a deep and commanding voice.

And they did.
The following Monday...

Most of the people entering the Great Hall that morning were surprised, in varying degrees. When Harry entered the room, the sentence he was telling was cut short by the new presence in the student body. It wasn't exactly a new one, but it was one he had learnt to love the lack of.

Malfoy was there.

Several had thought the worst about Malfoy's absence, but the boy was alive. Alive, and grinning evilly. Snape also had an amused expression, while Dumbledore looked defeated. Taking his usual seat,

Harry tentatively prodded Malfoy's mind, and dropped his fork in shock.

Draco Malfoy's mind was protected. Not with a shabby system even: there were sturdy stone walls in there, and Harry had barely the time to see that they encircled damaged memories, before remarking several large snakes slithering around the protected mind. He had barely enough time to retreat before being noticed by the dangerous-looking animals.

Picking his fork again, he thought about it for the remainder of the meal.

Who would have changed the boy's mind that way? How? Why?

Harry knew the answer of the second question. Malfoy hadn't been an Occlumens before, so he must have been aided. Knowing only few proficient Occlumens related to the blond boy's family, Harry supposed that it must have been either Snape or Voldemort, the latter being the most obvious because of the snakes – Snape had no creature around his mind.

Voldemort had done the same thing Harry had done with his friends before, helping Malfoy to shield his mind. However, Voldemort wasn't an altruistic person, and Harry remembered the state of the blond's memories he had glimpsed inside the walls. The Dark Lord must have pushed them together to cut his construction work, and some memories were unstably positioned while others looked brand new. Harry just hoped that Malfoy wouldn't go mad and curse everybody with Dark spells. He decided to drop a note to Dumbledore soon.

As to why Voldemort would have played the mason in Malfoy's mind, Harry could only suppose that it was because he had modified the minds of the entire Malfoy family. Voldemort might have seen through Harry's manipulations, and restored the blond family's old ways, even reinforcing them – hence the new protections.

After the meal, Harry Apparated out from an empty corridor and went to the Headmaster's office. Picking a writing pad from his schoolbag, he wrote a quick message and Apparated his hand out to drop the

message on the desk. The moment he did so, though, several things happened.

A purple ray hit his hand, and someone appeared from under an invisibility cloak. Someone with a wooden leg and an artificial eye. Mad-Eye Moody. The door opened at the same time, and Dumbledore entered his office, only to see a hand floating atop his desk.

A stone hand.

Harry swore violently, cursing himself for his lack of forethought again. He should have sensed the surroundings before dropping the note! Concentrating on his current predicament, he succeeded in bringing his hand into the gaseous reality despite the pain. Still focused, he brought his Metamorphmagus powers online, and fought the stone curse with all his might. The curse's effect was to change the skin it touched into stone and it was made so as the stone aspect and strength quickly propagated to the nearby skin cells. The Metamorphmagus powers could undo it, though, if applied with enough speed and willpower.

Harry had enough willpower for several hundred persons, and his hand slowly recovered its rosy aspect. After checking a last time that no stone pockets had escaped him, he looked at the scene around him.

There were three men arguing over his note. Three? Harry reflected that, while he had been fighting the flesh-to-stone curse, Dumbledore must have summoned Snape, and the Slytherin was arguing with... Moody? Bizarrely, Dumbledore stayed out of the argument, looking at the note absently. Harry put an ear out, and the content of the discussion brought home the feeling of strangeness.

"The boy belongs to a family of Death Eaters, and I know he had been raised as such." Moody was saying.

"You have no right to be here, and especially not to criticize a member of my House." Snape retorted.

“Your House, your House... I have had enough with your House!” Moody growled. “Especially since you are a Death Eater yourself.”

Snape turned to Dumbledore. “I ask you to remove him, Headmaster. He is deteriorating the school’s atmosphere.”

It was a fallacious argument, and all the listeners knew it, but, to Moody’s surprise, Dumbledore nodded. “Alastor, if you will...”

“What? Albus, you can’t be serious!”

“I will discuss with you later, Alastor. Please leave, now.”

The retired Auror fixed Snape with his piercing eyes, and the fact that both eyes were fixed on him brought a feeling of uneasiness in the Potion Master, but he shrugged it off.

“We are not done, Snape.” Moody said, before leaving.

After several minutes, the Headmaster looked at his Potion Master. “Severus, if that note is true, we have to make an investigation, at least. We can’t let anyone with such mental disorder among students.”

Snape looked at Dumbledore for a few seconds, before nodding. “I will take care of it.” he said, before grasping the sheet of paper from the man’s desk. He was already at the door when Dumbledore addressed him again.

“Severus... please...”

The pleading voice of the old man sounded horrible in Harry’s ear, and he almost Apparated in to curse the departing man. The Potion Master, having briefly stopped at the door when Dumbledore called for him, wordlessly resumed his walk and headed out.

Seeing the distraught old man – a vision he was sure nobody had seen in a century – Harry decided to do something about it and he

exited the office, only to Apparate in behind the door, with Jerry Homest's appearance and identity. He knocked.

After a few seconds, the Headmaster's voice resounded. "Enter."

Harry entered the office, only to find Dumbledore's wand trained on him. Focusing on Apparating out if the man uttered the slightest incantation, he addressed the Headmaster. "Please stow this away, Headmaster. It makes me very nervous."

"I have a few questions, first," said Dumbledore in a strained voice.

"Great! I have a couple questions myself. Shall we trade answers and lower wands?"

The Headmaster looked at the man in front of him and decided to trust him. So far, all his warnings and messages had been fruitful. Speaking of which...

"Did you just drop a note on my desk?"

"Can we settle down like gentlemen before launching the game?" Harry asked, before sitting in the comfortable chair in front of Dumbledore.

The Headmaster looked at the man in front of him and, after a thoughtful moment, decided to play along. He conjured a tea set, and served two mugs.

Harry took a couple of sips before putting the mug down. "You haven't answered my first question, Headmaster: do you want to trade answers or not?"

"I just could," answered Dumbledore, looking at him intently. "But how can I be sure of your answers' truthfulness?"

"Ah, but it's part of the game." Harry answered lightly. "I'm not sure of your truthfulness either, you know."

Dumbledore huffed. Nobody had ever questioned his wisdom, before. He found that refreshing, though, and almost smiled before remembering his first question.

“Did you, or did you not, write a note informing me of young Malfoy’s state of mind?”

“Yes.” Harry answered. “And its content is true. Last time I checked, the boy’s memories were stashed in an unhealthy pile, with a stone-like wall around them and large snakes slithering on the outside. I don’t recommend anyone from snooping over that mind.”

“How did you do it? And why would you check my students’ minds?”

Harry smiled, and shook his head. “It’s my turn for questions, Headmaster. Unless you want to up the ante...”

Dumbledore looked at him suspiciously. “What do you mean?”

“I have only three questions to ask you. I’m ready to exchange truthful answers to these against answers to the questions you surely have about me. I have only one provision, though. I know your way of telling things, and I only require that you take a wizard’s oath to ensure your truthfulness.”

“Why wouldn’t you take such an oath? Whatever the number of answers I get, if I’m not sure about the truthfulness of your answers, it’s not worth it.”

Harry thought about it, and reluctantly complied. “Alright. I’ll take it too, but know that there are several questions I can answer and others I can’t. Why don’t we exchange the questions first? We’ll then see if the oaths are really necessary.”

“Alright.”

The two men took a quill and scribbled on a sheet of parchment. Harry finished way before Dumbledore, and gave his sheet to the

man, before sitting back, sipping his tea and staring at him over the mug.

The Headmaster read the three questions and gasped. Twice.

“I’m ready to answer any number of questions in exchange to replies to these three.” Harry indicated. “And, for the tranquillity of your mind, we can both swear that none of what we say will be repeated. Or not.”

The Headmaster frowned and stared thoughtfully at the moustached man in front of him, considering his options. After a full minute of silence, he slowly acquiesced. “Alright. We’ll take the additional oath.” He then looked at him with a calculating glance. “Any number of questions, you said?”

Harry shrugged. “Any reasonable number, yes, but remember that I’ll tell you the ones I won’t be able to answer before we start.”

Dumbledore acquiesced, and continued to write. A few minutes later, he handed the parchment to Harry.

“I’m not allowed to tell you Harry Potter’s location,” Harry started, scratching the question out, “but he told me that you know he is in Brazil already, with the Dursleys.”

Ignoring Dumbledore’s expectant look and the subsequent mental probe, Harry continued to read the proposed questions. He couldn’t hide a smirk, though, when the probe left, dripping with disappointment.

At the last question, he frowned thoughtfully. After a few seconds, he scratched it as well before looking up. “I can’t tell you my full name and job either. Yes, since I don’t want to answer it, you now know that Jerry Homest isn’t my real name and that I’ m not journalist all the time. Since the last articles about the so-called blood purity, I’m glad to have used a pen name all that time, though.” He smiled. “I have no problem with the other questions.”

Dumbledore had thought the man would reject more questions, and he looked intrigued.

Harry's smile changed into a smirk. 'My answers will be truthful, old man, but it doesn't mean they will be accurate or even useable.' he thought guardedly. "Let's start, shall we?"

The Headmaster took his wand out, and spoke the sentence, closely followed by Harry. "I swear on my magic that I'll truthfully answer the questions on this parchment." they both said, touching the questions-filled parchment with their wand. "I also swear that what I learn here today won't be repeated to anyone or stored anywhere – apart from my own mind, where I will take the necessary steps to ensure that no one will be able to read that. So mote it be." they finished, and the two of them felt the magic of the oath taking place around them.

Harry spoke first, wanting to push the old man to sincerity by shocking him beforehand. "To the question "How to you drop messages and move around Hogwarts?" my answer is simple: Apparation."

"But... how..."

"I'll give you a free question: how do I do?"

Dumbledore nodded.

"I made a pact with Hogwarts, a long time ago." Harry said, recalling the event and retelling it with the minimal additional information. "Thanks to an heirloom from Rowena Ravenclaw that a couple of friends bought me at that time, I entered in contact with the castle's consciousness, and it allowed me to move around, unhindered by the castle's anti-Apparation field. I reckon Voldemort tried to achieve that sort of connection when he was possessing Snape, using Slytherin's way. Each Founder had his way to communicate with the castle."

Remembering his own medallion, the thoughtful old man nodded again, and Harry left him several seconds of silence to digest the information.

“To the question "How is Harry Potter?" the answer is: very well. He's learning the way of magic in his school.” Harry said, raising his hand to prevent Dumbledore's attempts at pushing the discussion farther in that direction.

“To the question "What do you know about Mr. Malfoy?" the answer is long and complex, especially since you didn't specify which one. I might know several interesting facts about both of them, though, things I don't think anyone knows.”

Harry extended his hand and started to count on his fingers. “Lucius Malfoy had been the right-hand man of Voldemort until he was imprisoned, and he hadn't recovered his master's favours after being freed. That spot now belongs to Rodolphus Lestrage. Lucius Malfoy also kept a stash of dark artefacts in his Manor, some of them on behalf of his master, but these items have been stolen recently.

“During his married life, Lucius Malfoy repeatedly used the Imperius and other mind-altering curses on his wife and son to discipline them. Lucius Malfoy revels in the darkness, ever since his own childhood, and he had taught his son in the darkness' ways as well: at the tender age of nine, Draco Malfoy was already proficient in each of the Unforgivable.

“Finally, Draco Malfoy's mind defences had recently been upgraded by someone very proficient in Legilimency and Occlumency. Someone who, I am quite certain, goes by the name Voldemort. Of course, it raises uncomfortable questions regarding the boy's presence in a school. As I said earlier, I would not suggest a mind snoop on the boy by anyone not proficient enough in both arts. On top of that, as my note told you, Voldemort had little care of the boy's sanity, and I fear he might snap at any moment, casting Unforgivables left and right. Shall I continue?”

Dumbledore was dumbfounded. Under the truth oath, the moustached man had spoken awful things about both Malfoys, displaying a deep knowledge of them and their involvement with the Dark Lord. These were grim news, though. Dumbledore was trustful,

and had often given second, third, or umpteenth chances to people who looked innocent enough – and who displayed sincere enough surface thoughts. His eyes had been opened forcefully, though, and he vowed not to let himself be fooled again.

Noticing the man's new resolute stance, Harry continued.

“To the question "Why do you read the students' minds, don't you know it's forbidden?" the answer is: I don't care if it's forbidden, since the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot does it as well.”

Dumbledore nodded, his resolute facade still in place, and he waved the answer away.

Harry wasn't finished, though. “You also covered other misuse of dark mind magic done by the person of Severus Snape.” he said, staring at the Headmaster for several seconds.

Harry knew that additional comments weren't tied by the truth oath due to its phrasing, and he wistfully added such an observation. “The Potter boy decided to leave Hogwarts for this very reason, you know. He had been mentally assailed by the Potion Master, an adult, member of your faculty. You shouldn't have covered it, and it leads to my first question: Why?”

Dumbledore shuddered, and knew he had to answer, now.

“To the question "What does Snape has over you?" my... answer is... a secret. A dark secret. A shameful action I did, which eventually caused millions of deaths.”

The old man fell silent, and, after a few seconds, Harry addressed him again, in a softer tone. “Let me guess... he blackmails you into keeping him as teacher despite the numerous complaints, that's it?”

Dumbledore nodded, still looking at the floor. The old man's mind was replaying battle scenes where the muggles' killing machines had destroyed so many lives. When he had finally noticed the scale of the conflict, Dumbledore had tried to intervene. He had tried several

spells, but the men he disabled were replaced by others in a constant manner. As a wizard, he had never been acquainted with war logistics such as this. His last attempt, a massive Cheering charm, had succeeded in producing what would be called the Christmas Truce, but the warring governments were too far gone to let the event repeat itself.

Harry was talking to him again, and Dumbledore looked up, looking every bit of his age. "What did you say?"

"Now that I know about it, do you want me to do something about it?"

"No!" Dumbledore exclaimed, before looking away. "He told me he had protected himself. 'As a true Slytherin' he said. He has made his will so that, if he disappears, I'm in trouble. And I can't relinquish my position before Voldemort is dealt with. That's why..."

The old man stopped suddenly, as if remembering he wasn't alone in the room. With a virtual stranger, no less. Despite this, Dumbledore felt strangely compelled to trust the man. "Later," he said. "Let's finish your questions."

Harry nodded, and looked at his parchment again. "To the question 'How do you know about Snape having something on me?' my answer is the same as your first question: Apparation. I don't want to tell more about it, though. Please accept an old man's request to keep a few secrets for himself."

Dumbledore looked at him questioningly for a few seconds, before smirking and nodding.

"To the question 'What do you know about Henry Evans and do you trust him?' my answers are: many things, and yes. He is part of my extended family, and I trust him as such."

That was the truth. A little bit distorted, but only the truth. 'Let's leave the old man simmer on this.' Harry reflected, before answering the next question.

“To the question "How were you warned of Voldemort's attack on the Crown Jewels and Windsor?" my answer is: I know someone, high-ranked in the Death Eaters organization, and who has no secrets for me. He seldom initiates a contact, though. The warning for that attack was a fluke.”

“Why doesn't he contact you?”

“I think that it's because he doesn't know about it.”

Dumbledore looked at the man facing him in wonder. If he had a spy in the Death Eaters, it would be a good idea to invite him in the Order ranks... and he would be forced to tell his name, then, he thought.

“To the question "How did you find the base for your articles, Harry Potter and the information about the wizarding lines?" – congratulations for wrapping two questions into one, by the way – my answer is: by sheer luck.” Harry said, smirking.

“And finally, to the question "What's your side in all this?" my answer is: against Voldemort.”

“You are with me, then?” asked Dumbledore. “I know of a group of people dedicated in fighting evil wizards, and-”

“Ah, yes. The famous Order of the Phoenix.”

“How do you know about it?” asked Dumbledore, slightly confused.

Harry looked at him. That was going to be a low blow. “It's not really a secret. Any slightly talented Legilimens could get the information from your people's minds. And I'm sorry to say that I'm not really on your side there. Unless Snape is removed from his position of power over you, I mean. Once this has been taken care of, I'll be able to help you a bit. I know quite a bit about protecting one's mind, as you already know.”

Dumbledore looked at him. The old Headmaster was reflecting about the important things that had been said, and needed a few seconds to digest everything again.

Seeing the old man nod, Harry addressed him again. "I think it's your turn, now. I finished my list and you have still two to go."

"Alright, alright. To the question "Why is the real reason for you putting Harry Potter in charge of the Dursleys instead of his godparents?" my answer is that I didn't want him to be raised from birth in a world putting him on a pedestal. I wanted him to enjoy a true childhood."

Harry snorted, and Dumbledore looked at him questioningly. "You voluntarily pushed a boy away from Britain's wizarding world yet you wonder why he doesn't come back?"

"Well... I thought it was best for him. And, since he is with the Dursleys, he's safe from Voldemort."

"What do you mean by that?" Harry enquired, genuinely curious.

"Ah, but this will stay secret for the moment." Dumbledore answered, the infamous twinkle having returned to his eyes. "As you said, leave a few secrets for an old man to keep."

Harry snorted. "I said that after answering to your sixth question, out of ten. I won't pry, though, if I deem your next answer complete. Tell me what you know about the Prophecy concerning Harry Potter, please."

Dumbledore looked at him for several seconds. "Since you said, under the truth oath, that you were against Voldemort, I'll answer your question."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but if I told you I was with him, you would have been compelled to tell the answer as well."

Dumbledore looked at him shrewdly. "You wouldn't have left this office alive, though. Don't make mistakes: I am still the one who killed Grindewald..." he said forcefully, before reverting to a soft voice. "...when I was younger."

Harry smiled, and sat back, waiting for an answer that could change his life.

After a few seconds, Dumbledore spoke again. "To the question "What do I know about the Prophecy concerning Harry Potter?" my answer is: it is kept in the Department of Mysteries of the Ministry of Magic, surrounded by numerous charms: only the people specifically named in a prophecy are able to take it off the shelf."

The Headmaster was looking at his interlocutor smugly, knowing that it was a true answer. He was ready to rebuff the man's attempt at getting more information, but, to his surprise, he found him nodding absently. Replaying the truth and non-divulgence oath they had both taken, Dumbledore reassured himself: there was no way that particular information would reach Harry Potter before he'd judge the time appropriate.

Little did he know.

The Headmaster intended to educate the boy properly before telling him the truth. A weapon had to be finely honed to be efficient. And, for that, he needed to find him. Missing the intent look the moustached man threw at him, he silently wondered where Karkaroff was.

"He's dead." Harry said suddenly, and Dumbledore noticed that the man was now standing, an annoyed frown on his face and sadness dripping from his eyes. An unusual combination.

"Err... what?"

"Karkaroff. He's dead. And you should watch your thoughts around me, Headmaster."

In front of the Headmaster's surprised gaze, Harry Apparated away. He had felt the Headmaster's intents towards him, and was rightfully angry, but he still had the death of Karkaroff and the whole muggle plane weighing on his conscience.

Not wanting to lose any time, Harry left for the Ministry right then. Once there, he registered as a journalist wanting to interview Arthur Weasley. After conducting a thorough interview for half an hour – to the surprise of Arthur and his co-workers – Harry was free to "go" and he used what he learnt from the redhead's mind to head towards the Department of Mysteries.

Harry arrived in front of a reception desk where a bored Auror received him. A bored Auror with close to no mental walls.

"What do you want?" said Auror asked.

Harry smirked. "I'm writing an article about the Ministry and the wonderful job the Aurors do guarding it." he started. "And, to demonstrate the utility of your job, I'd like to have a glance at something you guard. Something safe, of course. What do you suggest?" he asked, knowing full well what the answer would be since he chose it.

The man was flattered, and didn't know how to answer. "Err... thanks, I guess. Hmmm... yes, I think the Hall of Prophecies would be safe, since you can't touch one that doesn't concern you. I should accompany you, though, because the Unspeakable usually making the visits isn't available anymore. I've heard he had been caught in an aggravated burglary."

"Oh, I'm sorry for him. Was it at his home?" Harry asked with concern. It wasn't really genuine, but it sure was exaggerated.

"No. It was here." the Auror said, not asking himself questions about why he told all this to a journalist. "A box had been stolen and his dead body had been found near its pedestal. It's rumoured that the box contained the Eye of Rat. Or Horous, I don't remember exactly. Sorry, I'm no Egypt specialist."

“Who would have done such a horrendous act?” Harry asked innocently. “Isn’t the Ministry protected against such attempts?”

“Why, yes. The burglar must have been very strong magically, though: even the alarm spells, cast by the most proficient Unspeakables, had been disabled. As though they were simple household charms! And, concerning the thief’s identity, your guess is as good as mine.”

Harry’s guess was better than the man’s, and he was suddenly very interested. When thinking of people able to dismantle Ministry protections, there weren’t many names coming to the mind. After several seconds of silence, during which he stealthily removed memories of the robbery-related conversation from the man’s mind, he repeated his first question. “Can we go to the Hall of Prophecies now, please?”

“Ah, yes. I almost forgot, there. Follow me and don’t touch anything.” the man said, getting to his feet and motioning Harry towards one of the doors behind him.

Harry didn’t care how many places he visited on his way, and the way back was different anyways. It seemed that the Department of Mysteries was... full of mysteries. Once in the Hall of Prophecies, though, he mentally stunned the Auror and, after assuming his real identity, took the small glass sphere from the shelf it rested upon.

Looking at it intently, he noticed a lid on the underside of the sphere, and suddenly recognized the swirling liquid inside, having used his own little pensieve several times already. These were memories!

Harry wanted to be as inconspicuous as possible, and he figured that he could take the memory away and leave the glass ball there. He carefully transferred the memory to one of his numerous bottles and, using a simple household charm, he conjured some water to replace it in the now-empty glass sphere. He then put the sphere back on its display, where, after the liquid stopped swirling, it looked like the numerous ones around it,

Returning the bottle to his pocket and his Jerry Homest persona to his mind, he unfroze the Auror who continued the sentence he had started as if nothing had happened. Harry didn't pay attention, though. The only thing preventing him from running to the Apparation point and out of here was the fear of blowing his cover. Once back at the Department of Mysteries' reception desk, he checked with the man's memories to see if there were wards he knew about. Finding none, he Obliviated the last few minutes from his memories before heading out.

Now yearning to head out of there to hear what the prophecy was about, Harry almost ran into the last person he wanted to see right now – well, second to last, in fact. Dumbledore. And the man had noticed him as well. Taking care of shielding his surface thoughts, Harry greeted him in a cheerful voice.

“Headmaster! Fancy seeing you here.”

“Likewise, Mister Homest. Likewise, indeed. Can I ask you what you are doing here?” the old man asked, suspiciously peering at the badge on the journalist's robe.

Removing it and giving it to the nosy old man, Harry smiled. “As you can see, it was on a purely professional mission.”

After the morning meeting, Dumbledore didn't believe Jerry Homest able to have "purely professional" inclinations, and he delayed his meeting with Fudge to quickly check Harry's story with Arthur. To his dismay, the red-haired man confirmed the presence of the journalist and the half-hour interview.

After his meeting with the Minister, Dumbledore followed a hunch and asked the Auror guarding the Department of Mysteries about an old moustached man, but the man shook his head in denial, and his memories confirmed it.

It was a thoughtful Dumbledore who left the Ministry to head to Hogwarts for lunch. His two Defence teachers' conversation about the absence of a certain tiger didn't even reach his consciousness.

Someone else was missing, though. Only when the meal was finished did Dumbledore notice it. It was even more visible since the boy had been there this morning. He asked the question to the castle through his medallion, and the reply made him hurry towards the Hospital Wing.

Earlier...

Harry had left the Ministry in a hurry, his mind firmly set on discovering the Prophecy's content. After moving a bit from the Ministry, he had stopped in the gaseous reality and extracted the bottle. After considering the swirling quicksilver-like liquid for a second, he took his wand and brought it to his mind...

...and he saw Sybill Trelawney stand suddenly. In a hoarse voice, she spoke the strange words:

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches ... Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies ... And the Dark Lord will mark him as equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not ... And either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives."

Sitting back, the woman shook her head and looked at him. "Where were we?" she asked in her regular voice.

The memory ended there. Harry replayed it several times, and began to feel mightily annoyed. So, he had to kill the Dark Lord or be killed by him? Given his current understanding of magic and the level of power he had last perceived from Voldemort, it shouldn't be too big a problem. And, even if he didn't like it, he had already killed before and one more casualty – especially him – wasn't going to weigh down on his conscience.

There was something that disturbed him in the memory, though. Two things, in fact. Fishing his portable pensieve from his locket, he dropped the memory in there and plunged into it. Even restricted in

the number of memories it could hold, the powerful magical item acted like its more expensive counterparts: it reconstructed the whole scene, and Harry looked around...

...only to have a mighty shock. The person with Trelawney, the person whose mind the memory had been copied from, was Albus Dumbledore! The old man had known the Prophecy all along! Harry started to feel a burning anger course through his veins, but it calmed quickly. Even if angry outbursts were satisfying for one's ego, they weren't leading anywhere – something each Slytherin knew by heart.

‘Patience, patience.’ he thought. ‘He did underestimate me, after all, since I got the Prophecy. Now, I just have to find Voldemort, kill him, and I’ll be free to live my own life.’

Still in the memory, Harry looked around to see if there were other things he'd be able to learn. That's when the second disturbing thing looked him in the face. The room's door was ajar, and someone was eavesdropping! Harry went there and passed through the imaginary door, only to find himself face-to-face with a younger Severus Snape. As the pensieve rewound and played the memory again, Harry noticed that the Slytherin spy was forced to leave prematurely by a group of approaching people.

So... Snape had known part of the Prophecy even before Dumbledore told him so? A prophecy involving Harry and Voldemort? And he hadn't heard everything? As the pensieve was replaying the memory automatically, Harry paid close attention to the words filtering from the door. There was less and less doubt about what Snape had heard and what he hadn't, and another core of anger forged itself in Harry's heart, joining the other ones related to the Potion teacher. Pettigrew had perhaps betrayed his parents, but Snape was the one who had thrown Voldemort on the road to the Potters' household. Even if Harry didn't know that other people could have been involved, there was no doubt, now, about who had been marked by Voldemort, according to the Prophecy.

Harry absently rubbed the place of his forehead where the lightning bolt-shaped scar was situated – when visible. He then pulled at his body's connection, exiting the memory. Putting it back into his mind,

he made sure to protect it completely before heading back to Hogwarts.

On his way, though, he crossed the grey shape of Charring Cross Hospital, and, remembering his stay there, an idea found his way in his mind. Still in the alternate reality, he quickly found a physician and extracted a few pieces of information from the man's mind: where the stock of morphine was kept, and how it was used – with the appropriate dosage calculations. Acting on these, he stole a few sterile intravenous needles and a bottle of perfusion solution containing morphine. Stowing these in his pockets, he headed towards Hogwarts again, assuming Kentaro's identity and appearance on the way.

Once in the castle, he noticed that the students were rushing to lunch, and he spotted Malfoy coming his way, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle. Harry knew that Malfoy's mind was protected, but that had barely slowed him before. He also knew that he was still better than the blond in duelling. Whichever choice he'd make, he also knew that Malfoy's bodyguards wouldn't be a problem – although he didn't want to be seen in the boys' memories. His decision taken, he silently Apparated right behind Malfoy, Ravenclaw's ring aimed at his back.

“Stupefy.”

The blond started to fall down in the deserted corridor, but Harry grabbed him and Apparated out before he could reach the floor. Once out of sight, he also Obliviated Crabbe and Goyle before leaving toward the dorms.

It was time for the boy's injection.

Once the appropriate dose of morphine was in Malfoy's bloodstream, Harry entered the boy's mind, keeping to the sides until he noticed that the defending snakes had fallen asleep. Once it was done, Harry quickly grabbed whatever new memory he could without disturbing the instable arrangements of blocks. He found out that his earlier hunch had been only partly true: it was Voldemort and Snape who had transformed the boy's mind.

After having seen everything that had to be seen, Harry exited the murky mind. He then dragged Malfoy's slumped body through the gaseous reality, and dropped him in the Hospital Wing with a note.

A short time later, Dumbledore hurried inside the bed-filled room. The old Headmaster had just enough time to pick the note and read it before someone else entered the wing. Snape had noticed the Headmaster's quickened pace, and he had followed him there. Even though he was annoyed at the interruption, Dumbledore smiled nonetheless, while surreptitiously hiding the note in one of his numerous pockets.

"What do we have here?" asked Snape.

"Why, Severus, I wanted to ask you the same thing, you know."

As she was always taking her meals in her quarters nearby, Madam Pomfrey heard the voices in her infirmary, and she popped her head out of the door. "Albus? What is the meaning of... Oh!"

She darted to the prone boy's side and ran a couple of diagnostic spells.

"Err... Poppy? Haven't you run these spells already?" asked Dumbledore.

The addressed Hospital Matron finished her work before answering. "No, why? Wasn't it you who put him here?" Seeing the two men's firm shake of head, she sighed. "Not again..."

"Not again? What do you mean?" demanded Snape.

She looked at them. "It's perhaps nothing, but, last year, during the Basilisk incident, there had been students who appeared here without warning. The doorway is enchanted to warn me if anyone ill enters."

Dumbledore nodded absently, looking at Malfoy.

The move wasn't lost to Snape, though. "Headmaster? I think we have something to discuss. Can we head to your office?"

The addressed man looked at him and, noticing the gleam in the Potion Master's black eyes, he relented.

Once in said office, Snape addressed him more harshly. "You know something that I don't. Spill."

"What do you mean, my boy?"

Snape bristled at the endearing expression. "I told you not to call me that! Now, what do you know about these students appearing? I saw you, you weren't surprised when Poppy told you about them. And what is it with Dra- Mr. Malfoy?"

Dumbledore's shoulders slumped and he opened his mouth to answers, but was promptly interrupted by an insistent knock at his door. He shrugged towards Snape and, with a faint inkling of whom it might be, he yelled "Enter!"

His hunch was confirmed when Jerry Homest entered the room.

Snape looked at the newcomer, distaste evident in his manners. "I have a class to teach." he merely said before exiting the room.

Harry sat and looked at the Headmaster intently. After a few seconds of silence, Dumbledore relented. "What is it, now, Mr. Homest?"

"Please, call me Jerry." Harry answered, sitting back. "I have seen young Malfoy's state and I'm ashamed to say that I took advantage of it."

"What? What did you do?"

"Relax! I just gave him a... potion... and checked his mind again."

“Which potion? He was unconscious, and I don’t know of a potion able to interact with Occlumency shields. If what you said earlier is true, they are up even when sleeping.”

“Ah, but that’s where our ingenious muggles come into play.” Harry answered, picking one of the wrapped needles from his pocket. “As you might know, this is a syringe, and it is used to inject fluids into the human body. I just gave the boy a shot of something which... put his mind to sleep, I would say.”

Dumbledore was flabbergasted. That really was a day of strange revelations. “And what did you find?” he finally asked, letting go of the fact that the man had invaded one of his students’ mind again – as what Harry had told him was true, he knew the boy had to have such a treatment.

“You are not going to like it. Voldemort and Snape had a role in the mind’s rebuilding. That’s why I couldn’t change it too much. With Snape around, and all.”

“What did you do, then?”

Harry looked at the old man with a smirk. “I just unplugged the harmful memories. They are still linked together, so as to appear as though they were useable, but the boy won’t be able to cast dark curses... for the moment.”

“For the moment? Why so?”

“I have no doubt that, once Snape notices his favourite student refraining from using these curses, he will try to change his mind again.”

They stayed silent for a thoughtful minute, envisioning the possible Potion Master’s reaction to the change in Malfoy’s mind.

Harry then looked at Dumbledore. “You said you didn’t want me to interact with your esteemed Potion Master and blackmailer... but we could use the morphine on him, too.”

“The what?”

“The potion to disable mental walls. You could then see by yourself what he does in his free time, and where he stowed his blackmail safety.” Harry said, smirking at the Headmaster’s startled expression.

After several more seconds of silence, the Headmaster nodded. “Alright. But not now. I still need him to teach for the rest of the year.”

“Didn’t you replace him before?”

“True. But, in doing so, I postponed my other duties. In a few days, I will have to manage half of the Wizengamot body’s election, and Fudge doesn’t stop harassing me about it. You understand that I can’t jeopardize the students’ future.”

Harry frowned. “And the students’ life? Are you willing to endanger them?”

“Not at all.” Dumbledore said, shaking his head with a faint smile. “You seem to have taken good care of Mr Malfoy. And I already told Severus that, whatever the way he blackmails me, I wouldn’t allow him to take the life of a student.”

Harry grumbled, but he couldn’t alter the old man’s point of view. Noticing the time, he took his leave and changed into his student form. He was quite late for the Transfiguration period, and invoked a nap he pretended oversleeping. McGonagall took points, as usual in such an occurrence, but the woman smiled internally. She was sure that the boy would recover the lost points and more by the period’s end.

As the class went by, her premonition got confirmed. It pained her to admit it – because he wasn’t in Gryffindor – but the Slytherin was extremely proficient in her class. Even more than James Potter. The memory pained her, and she returned to her desk, missing the intent look Harry threw her.

To be continued in next chapter: Spy Games...

The memories acquired,
Harry's a little tired.
He knows his destiny bit,
Now, I guess he'll work on it.

Chapter 23 – Spy Games

posted November 19th, 2005

Earlier that year...

That 25 January, under his current assumed identity and face, Matthew Powell was waiting for his contact to show himself. Despite his age, the spy had been successfully hired as a pizza delivery man, and he knew that the meeting place was the line of cars waiting at a particular crossing before the CIA headquarters.

When the brown sedan appeared, Powell mounted his motorcycle, and approached the car from the driver's side. The bald and bespectacled man there had opened the car's window and was unnoticeably waiting for him. Powell braked beside the open window, and the two of them engaged in an apparently meaningless conversation about pizzas and prices. The chat contained several markers for them to identify themselves properly, though, and, once it was done, Powell gave the man a pizza box. His contact, still playing the act, seemed to return it almost immediately. However, despite having the same casing, the content wasn't the same.

Powell was supposed to receive a confidential folder in that box (which was why he hadn't reacted at the box's weight), and wasn't supposed to open it outside – especially not there, where many other CIA employees could see the box's content. However, his long years of spying and psychological assessment had taught him many things, and he immediately knew from the man's face that something was amiss. Throwing caution to the wind, he decided to open the box right there and, ever so slowly, started to do so, peering inside while still keeping an eye on the man.

Seeing him beginning to open the box, said contact recoiled at once, protecting his face with his arms. Reacting with a speed that was the result of long years of practise, Powell threw the fake pizza box through the car's open window and sped forward at the same time.

The pizza box whirled in the air for a fraction of second before impacting the sedan's passenger seat, the shock making it open widely. The wire that was attached to its lid pulled the trigger of a C4

explosive, and a tremendous explosion rocked the intersection, killing Powell's treacherous contact and the employee waiting behind him. Three others were wounded in the explosion, and Powell himself barely escaped it, his motorbike swerving dangerously.

'I'm too old for this.' he thought, but the adrenaline rush he had felt was a kind of drug and he knew he could never really retire. Fearing the possible surveillance cameras, though, he decided to go back to Geneva to get another visage as soon as possible. That evening, he was on a plane for Europe, and arrived at Harry's safe house soon after. He didn't know that the intersection had been devoid of cameras and that no one had noticed anything – regarding him, of course; everyone had noticed the explosion. A month later, in Moscow...

Piotr Ivashutin took another sip of his whisky, revelling in the strong aromas it delivered to his palate. Hearing voices in the room nearby, the GRU General suddenly frowned and looked at the communication door in disgust. His wife was watching reruns of dubbed American series again! He went to his Japanese hi-fi set. "Better to buy Japanese goods than corrupted American items." he always said. Besides, there was simply no other way to play CDs of the choirs of the Red Army. He also knew that certain things could simply not be bought in Russia at all, the amber liquid in his glass being one of them.

When the male voices filled the room, singing patriotic songs from his youth, the man closed his eyes, leaned back, and took another sip. When his wife came banging at the door, he didn't even open his eyes and used the remote control to increase the volume. The banging came to a stop, and he smiled.

His smile faded quickly when he remembered his current predicament. Even if no one could really order him around, there had been people whispering behind his back, mentioning things that he did for his strange contact. Since the man had helped him in similar situations in the past, he had used the strange gem to call him, but the man hadn't answered. Like anyone with his power and intelligence-gathering resources, the General didn't like when he

didn't know about something important, and he angrily threw his glass in the fireplace, where the remaining drops of alcohol rekindled the dying embers.

Sighing, he took another glass from the low cupboard and served himself another dose of whisky before thinking about his contact again. There were only two things he knew: his forename was Igor, and he was working at a place called Durmstrang. That last piece of information had escaped the man once, and the information had been kept jealously in the depths of the General's mind. He had long since tried to find discreetly where Durmstrang was, but there was no place or business with that name in Russia, or even in the whole world.

The more he thought about it, the more urgent it seemed, and, by the time the disc was finished, he had downed two more glasses of liquor and had taken the decision to put each and every agent in search of people waving twigs around.

It was a decision he would come to regret someday. A day when he would be more sober, to begin with.
At the same time, in a virtual chat room...

"Come on, Richard, I know you want to. More importantly, you know you want to."

"I don't know, Harry... It sounds so... cliché. Magic? People will never buy it."

"LOL! What's the name of the company you prospected, already?"

"Wizards, I know."

"It's only logical, then, that Wizards would sell Magic."

"Alright, I'll do it. Are you sure you don't want a part of the business?"

"I told you already, Richard. I'm not real. I'm a virtual duplicate of a 12-years old magician."

“ROFL. You’re really funny, that’s what I like. I’m a man of honour, though, and I’ll put 30 percent of what I make on a separate bank account. Even if you don’t want it, it’s yours. It has been your ideas from the start.”

“...alright, alright, I relent.”

“Thank you (grin). I have to go, now. My Ph.D. director wants to know what I’m doing with my time – I guess it’ll be more difficult to argue with him. See you later.”

“Cheers. Seeya.”

Richard Garfield closed the chat window, and looked at the doodles on his notebook. His board game had been rejected, and he hoped that this new concept would be accepted. Collectible cards games? That would be a first...

Copypat looked at his virtual window pensively. The Web had started to fill the numerous servers on the Internet, causing more and more traffic. It was annoying him, because it was like having an itch that he couldn’t scratch. Especially when people started to send multiple messages at the same time, something that would be coined as "spamming" just a week afterwards.

He reflected that, if Garfield succeeded in pushing the idea forward, if it was a commercial blast, and if he was as honourable as he claimed (he knew it was many ifs), he could ask him to buy supercomputers for him to lodge, gathering his consciousness in one place – today’s supercomputers were more and more shielded from the outside world, and he had lost useful memories several times. Returning to the swarm of computers that hosted his consciousness, he reflected about it.

Magic. The Gathering.

It had a nice sound in it.

It could work.

A month later, Hogwarts' Great Hall...

The morning mail arrived, with the usual number of Daily Prophet owls landing near subscribers. Harry hadn't warned his red-haired friends about it, and, smiling lightly, he looked at them while they took the usual cursory glance through the paper they shared. His smile broadened when Ron yelped, and he imagined what they were feeling, seeing their father's interview in a newspaper.

Incidentally, it was situated right next to another article explaining several points of Mathilda Werner-Prince's theory on blood purity. When Harry had dropped his article about Arthur at the newspaper's headquarters, the Daily Prophet manager had blocked him for a full hour. The man had explained that numerous persons, actually quite interested, had asked the newspaper about the issues relative to blood and genetics. Since he knew several of these personally, Richman had pointed out that some of them were high-level Ministry employees. The boy had finally relented, answering the questions through a quickly-written albeit inspired article.

"Who are you smiling to, Anderson? The ghosts?" a voice drawled behind him. Malfoy.

Harry's smile disappeared, but he didn't move, knowing it would infuriate the blond even more. And Snape, too. Since the blond's arrival in school, Snape had recovered his usual cheerful personality. Especially after Malfoy's healing. Thinking about it, Harry realized that Snape must have been tired of remodelling his charge's mind and that's perhaps why he had been so... unresponsive. Unless it was something else?

He continued to eat his cereals, and, when he sensed Goyle's attack, he moved to the side and grabbed the sugar, avoiding the blow. Goyle's hand impacted with his bowl, though, and cereals and milk were sent everywhere in the vicinity, as well as ceramic bits. When the large boy retreated, he started to bawl at the blood seeping through the cereals still sticking to his fist.

Harry rolled his eyes. The fat lump had succeeded in hurting himself! By slamming his fist on the fragile item, Goyle had stuck ceramic debris in his knuckles, drawing blood. And he was sure that he was going to be...

“Anderson! 10 points from Slytherin for hurting a Slyth- a student; 5 points for dirtying the place, and detention with me at five today!”

...punished for it. Trust Snape to show himself now. He sighed, and looked at the Headmaster, who was in deep conversation with McGonagall... it seemed.

“No no no, Anderson.” Snape whispered threateningly. “I am your Head of House, and the Headmaster isn’t concerned by your petty quandaries. And don’t worry about your Quidditch practice; I’m sure that your Captain will find a replacement quickly enough, now that he’s back.” Snape stated, looking at Malfoy with a smug expression. “Five o’clock sharp. Today.” he finished, before leaving the Hall, robes billowing behind him.

Hearing the sniggers behind him, Harry frowned, before smirking, a plan forming in his mind. After all, he had already done it, so... why not again? Besides, it would teach the blond boy a lesson in humility.

The morning periods were Transfiguration and Herbology, and Harry used the first to get top-of-the-range information about Organic Transfiguration from McGonagall’s mind. He was a bit surprised to see a slight protection around the stern teacher’s mind, but he jumped over it quickly. Her mind was very well ordered, and Harry noticed other interesting memories labelled Animation and Conjunction, but he didn’t have time to absorb them right now. The Herbology period was spent absently reviewing his plan, and also looking at Neville when the boy showed the class how to pot today’s carnivorous plant safely. The boy sure had acquired a backbone. And several House points in the process.

With Malfoy’s constant nagging and the glum expression the three Chasers showed, lunch wasn’t a pleasant affair. It was followed by Defence, though, and Harry gained enough points to refill the loss

from the Potion lesson of the day before. When the double period drew to a close, he mentally contacted his teacher.

‘Thanks for the points, Moony. I have a request, though.’

‘It’s alright, cub. What do you want?’

‘Keep me and Malfoy after class.’

‘Duel?’

‘No, practical prank.’

‘Uh oh. Why do I have the feeling that I won’t like it?’

‘Come on, I know you will.’

The bell rang, and Remus had just the time to intercept the blond boy before he left.

“Whaaat?” Malfoy wailed.

“Why were you in such a hurry, Mr Malfoy?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“5 points for your rudeness, Mr Malfoy.” Remus said, before waving the blond’s bodyguards away.

When Malfoy noticed that he was alone with three persons he particularly disliked, he started to whine again. “What are you doing? I’m not-”

“Petrificatus Totalus.” Harry said, and the blond fell face first, his nose making a snapping sound on the stone floor.

“Oops?” Harry proposed.

“Secure the place, please.” Remus told Sirius, before looking at Harry intently. “So, what was the prank you wanted to pull?” he asked after several seconds.

From the doorway, where he had cast several privacy and locking charms, Sirius grinned widely and his face lit up like a Christmas tree. “My ears picked a word I love. A prank?”

Harry nodded, before straightening Malfoy up. “Can you hold him upright?” he asked. They complied, and he stared at the boy’s face intently, before using his Metamorphmagus powers to change his body again, assuming Malfoy’s shape, face, and identity. The blond’s mind had changed since the last time he had impersonated him, though, and Harry knew he would spend quite a long time duplicating his defences. He then used everything he knew in Organic Transfiguration to change Malfoy’s body for it to look like his own.

When it was done, he temporarily transfigured the wands – his and Malfoy’s – so that each looked like the other’s wand. Since he was launched on a Transfiguration spree, he also took Malfoy’s old schoolbag from inside his own and morphed it into a pale imitation of his own. He then grabbed the blond’s bag and, after emptying it inside his enlarged one, carefully placed said enlarged bag inside it. The end result was a schoolbag that was Malfoy’s and which contained all Harry’s usual stuff.

He then looked at the two teachers and noticed their appreciative gazes.

“Impressive work.” Sirius said, prodding at Malfoy’s new face. “Undetectable and all.”

“Indeed.” Remus added. “Too bad we can’t give points for Transfiguration.”

“We wouldn’t know who to give them to, though.” Sirius added.

“What about his mind?” Remus asked.

“I’ll take care of that.” Harry answered. “I just have to-”

He was interrupted by someone banging on the door. “Black! Lupin! I know you’re here! Open!”

It was Snape. Sirius looked afraid, but Harry nodded, before dragging Malfoy toward the duelling platforms. While Sirius was going to the door, he unceremoniously dropped him near the end of one before standing at the other end, wand drawn.

“What is the meaning of this?” Snape demanded. “Crabbe said-”

“Good afternoon, Severus.” Sirius said sarcastically.

“As you see here,” Remus continued, “we deemed useful to assess the level of these two students, and young Mister Malfoy here dispatched his opponent quickly and soundly.”

“I’d say!” Sirius amended, “I see myself forced to award 10 points to Mister Malfoy for the demonstration. I hope Mister Anderson will learn from him.”

Snape nodded, a smug smile on his face. “Indeed.” he said, before leaning towards Harry – whom he thought as Malfoy. “Meet me in my office after dinner, if you want some more shots at him.” he whispered.

Harry nodded, a Malfoy-like sneer on his face, and Snape left soon afterwards.

As soon as he was out, the privacy and locking charms back in place, Harry’s sneer vanished. “I swear, this boy must have more facial muscles than anyone I know, to keep his sneer permanently.”

He then went to Malfoy’s prone shape. “I know you are conscious, Malfoy. What do you say? Interesting, no? You are going to be me, and I’m going to be you. Recognize this?” he asked, extracting a syringe from his bag. “Of course not. I wiped your memories of it the last time I did it. Now, stay put.” he said, before mock-frowning. A

second later, Harry chuckled. "Silly me. Of course you'll stay put. You're cursed to stay put."

Once again, he swiftly gave the blond a small shot of morphine, before Banishing the used needle and stowing the bottle away. Smiling at Snape's choice of words about "shots", he went to the boy's mind border again and waited for the snakes to sleep. This time, though, he had much more work to do. He started by moving one of the snakes in his own mind – locking it in a cage for later study – and then studied the boy's mind structure. It wasn't that complex, and he knew he would be able to restore it whenever he wanted. After removing the remaining snakes and the walls, he dug a hidden cache in the ground under the white building to store the boy's real consciousness and identity, which he replaced by a copy of his own fake identity. In the process, though, he took care of strengthening the bounds between the boy's memories so that he wouldn't go crazy.

In doing so, he remarked something unusual. Something related with the boy's memories of Voldemort. Harry had explored the boy's mind before, and had then noticed that Snape, as well as Voldemort, had a hand in the boy's previously-new state of mind. However, these memories always depicted Voldemort as a dark shape against a dark wall. Given the way torchlight didn't pass through his body, Harry was sure that the Dark Lord had been corporeal at that time. And unnaturally tall. Malfoy had been physically held lying on a low table at that time, and Harry couldn't find anything else related to Voldemort. He wondered about it for a second: was Voldemort's new host a tall man?

When he exited the boy's mind, looking around in the way, he was satisfied by his handiwork, and cancelled his Petrifying spell from the boy.

"What's your name?" he asked.

The boy struggled, but finally, defeated, he replied "Anderson." Something that satisfied Harry to no end.

“Good. Don’t forget your detention in...” he looked at his watch – Malfoy’s, again – “...eight minutes, Anderson. I’m sure Snape wouldn’t like you being late, and all.” he said, before shouldering his bag.

At the mention of the Potion Master, Malfoy’s eyes lit up, and he – reluctantly – grabbed "his" old bag before leaving towards the dungeons.

Harry nodded to the teachers and left as well, trying to follow Malfoy. As soon as he left the classroom, though, he noticed a little something that would cause problems. Two large things, in fact, lumbering behind him. Crabbe and Goyle.

Whirling around, he addressed them. “What are you doing?”

“Err... following you?” said Goyle.

“Beating the mudbloods?” said Crabbe.

“Like you always tell us to do.” finished Goyle.

“Alright. What I want you to do, right now, is to go to the Library.”

The two of them looked at each other stupidly, before turning to him.

“Huh...” started Crabbe.

“Where is it?” continued Goyle.

Harry looked at them in disbelief. “You don’t know where the Library is? After one year and a half? Have you ever been there?” he asked.

“Yeah.” Goyle said.

“With you.” provided Crabbe.

Harry sighed. How could somebody live beside these two without having fits of frustration, that was a mystery he actually didn’t want to

dig into. And he was getting late for what he thought would be an interesting confrontation. He looked around, and, not seeing anyone, he simply disappeared and Obliviated the last few memories from the two boys.

Hurling himself through the castle, he arrived at the Potion classroom in time to see Malfoy earn himself a strong talking-to.

“Sir, I’ve a problem.” the not-blond-anymore boy started, only to be cut off immediately by Snape.

“Your problem isn’t my problem. I’ll take 5 points for interrupting my grading session.”

‘ Good.’ thought Harry. ‘It might do well for Malfoy’s open-mindedness to see what it means to be the opposite of a teacher’s pet.’

“But... sir, I’m Kentaro Anderson! I mean... I’m... Anderson. Argh!” Malfoy almost had tears in his eyes as he was trying to give his identity to the Potion Master.

The man wasn’t impressed, though. “What if you are? Your name doesn’t mean anything, Anderson. You’re not a pureblood either. Now, since you are here a couple of minutes early, why don’t you start scrubbing these cauldrons here... without magic. Give me your wand.”

Despite bristling at being denied his pureblood status, Malfoy understood that he wouldn’t get anything from the man, and he started the gruelling work, his shoulders slumped. The teacher he thought as a role model was slowly but surely making Malfoy reconsider his views about him.

Harry smirked and left the boy to his task, before checking with Cassie that it would report him as Malfoy and vice-versa. He then went to his common room for a quick recruitment job before heading to the Quidditch pitch.

Once there, he immediately quieted Tracey's anguish by mentally warning her of his identity. Attuned to the girl's senses, the other two Chasers felt her relief and looked at her inquiringly. Her Occlumency training kicked in, and she shoved the memory in a protected part of her mind.

As the perceived Captain, Harry had taken the decision of hiring Bletchley as Keeper, for the training session and probably for the following game as well. The teen had been the second best at the tryouts, and they needed to work on that, especially as Malfoy wouldn't make a good Keeper in any case.

The training session went well, but Harry distinctively felt that it could be better if they had a true opposition. After all, as the muggle strategists said: "no plan survives the first encounter with the enemy." He decided that he would eventually try to recruit a secondary team, who could also act as reserve players, should any of the regular players fall off their broom. He knew that there were several good players aside the official House team.

The session finished, they were all famished, and returned to the Great Hall, where Harry mentally contacted each of his friends to warn them about the identity switch change – no need for one of them to blabber secrets to Malfoy, of all people.

He couldn't warn those of his friends with an unprotected mind, though, as he needed to bury the secret there first. That's partly why the Weasley twins mistakenly thought of him as a prime prank target again. When he drank his pumpkin juice, he immediately remarked a sour aftertaste, and fought whatever poison was corrupting the swig with his Metamorphmagus ability. The aftertaste disappeared quickly and he ingenuously transfigured the rest of his juice into regular pumpkin juice before guzzling it in one go.

There were few people able to put things in a goblet and his first idea was that the Weasley twins had wanted to pull a prank on him. When he checked with their minds, he discovered that it was in fact the case, easing his mind – he didn't know what he would do if somebody tried to actually poison him.

He concentrated on the twins' glasses, and, using Ravenclaw's ring – dissimulated as Malfoy's usual regalia – he transfigured the content into vodka-orange cocktails. When the twins took a gulp from them, disappointed about their failed prank, they quickly put their glasses back on the table in shock. Harry then sent a toast to them and they tentatively replied.

‘Do not worry.’ he sent, before working on the hidden part of their minds. Without revealing everything, he gave them sufficient information for them to know his identity. They grinned insanely, and, after downing their improved drinks, they began to giggle equally insanely, before being slapped on the arm by their little sister.

Harry took advantage of the rest of the meal duration to upgrade the defences around his fake mind, making it look like Malfoy's in case Snape wanted to snoop.

Doing so, he made a mental note of checking later – as he didn't have time right now – about the kind of poison he could imbue his defending snakes with. Perhaps a self-propagating virus? That could be useful to reach remote members of a group where mind-readers evolved. Namely, the Death Eaters...

The dessert finished, Harry followed Snape's suggestion – or, as he had perceived it, veiled order – and headed to the Potion classroom. Malfoy was there, scrubbing the sticky, dirty, and smelly cauldrons, a disheartened look on his face, while Snape was belittling him every other minute.

Checking with Malfoy's memories of interacting with the man, he went to Snape and addressed him informally. “Godfather, it's a pleasure to see the half-blood get what he deserves.”

“Come here, Draco.” Snape said, before casting several spells on the closed door. “No need to yell your allegiances to listening ears. I thought you were better than that.” He then smiled, and Harry almost recoiled in shock. Snape, smiling? It was an evil one, though. “It's time to practice your lesson.”

Seeing that Malfoy had frozen on the spot, Harry quickly checked the boy's memories and found out that it was the Unforgivables lesson. Reacting quickly, he carefully directed the teacher's interest off his attention lapse. "Sir, what if... Anderson... notices?"

"Of course! He will notice. After all, he will be the willing target. Aren't you, Anderson?"

Malfoy was now trembling like a sheet. He knew, since he had been on the other side before, that the practice target was going to hurt. Terribly.

"You'll practice your Obliviation as well." Snape continued absently. "Yesterday, I had to repeat it twice. Who would have thought of a Weasley female having a backbone?"

Harry finally understood. He finally understood what Ginny's previously unknown ailment had been, and he understood what kind of spells the Potion Master was training the young Slytherin in. He barely contained his brimming anger in a closed memory, but knew that he would have to act on it soon.

If only Dumbledore wasn't so behind the times!

Snape mistook his expression for eagerness and directed a trembling Malfoy toward the two of them.

"Imperio." said Harry, and the other boy's eyes glazed over immediately.

"Good." Snape said, inspecting the state. "Let's test your command on him, now. Order him to put his hand in that candle's flame." he said, pointing at a nearby candelabra. Harry complied, his lips taut as he watched Malfoy obey. He stopped before the boy could have long-lasting wounds, though.

"Cancel the spell, now. Good." Snape said, commenting on Harry's actions. "Cruciatu is next. When you're ready."

Harry looked at Malfoy, digging in his memories how the curse was done and the boy's level in it. Said level seemed uneven, as certain sessions were better than others – on the point of view of proficiency uniquely. Now that he knew what to search, Harry fetched the memory of yesterday's session and discovered that Malfoy's hatred of the Weasley had been enough to make the red-headed witch scream in pain for long minutes.

His righteous anger reached another level, and he painfully put a lid on it as well. He didn't want to actually kill anyone, especially with that curse.

"Crucio." he exclaimed, and Malfoy fell to the floor, writhing in pain.

Harry immediately understood the difference between Malfoy and him. Between Snape and him. Between each and every practitioner of the Dark Arts in the world and him.

He didn't feel elated or victorious. He didn't feel avenged. He felt bad and painful. As if he was feeling the curse as well.

Through whichever curse or blessing, unless it was simply compassion, a feedback of the curse rebounded on him and it took all his willpower not to flinch visibly. He didn't want to injure Malfoy more than that and lifted his Cruciatus almost immediately, only to meet Snape's eyes. "Not bad." the man said. "You have already done better, though. I always told you to concentrate your hate. Why did you lift the curse?"

"I'm tired, sir. The practice was long and tedious."

"Still, that boy is a thorn in Slytherin's side, Draco!" Snape said, unknowingly addressing Harry. "For too long, he has been gaining power behind your back. He must be bent to our views, or broken in the process!" he exclaimed, before looking at Harry shrewdly. "With all the ongoing feud between you two, I'm surprised that you didn't push more into it."

Harry was truly afraid, since he knew he could really do harm with this spell if he pushed it. Not the pain Malfoy had been enduring, no. Permanent and debilitating harm. Especially when used against Malfoy. Or Snape. He masked his emotions, though, and straightened up. "I'm sorry, sir, but it's the truth. Since the other teams seem to use tricks to win, I just told our team to practice some more than usual." Noticing the disbelief etched on Snape's face, he pulled his best sneer on his face. "I truly made them sweat, sir, but it still tired me. You can read my mind to see what happened."

The Potion Master looked at him with an appraising look. "Very well. I shall believe you, for now. Obliviate him, now, and remember that I'll check your results. We wouldn't want Anderson to blabber about you casting this kind of curses here, would we? Nor would we like him repeating what we just said."

"Obliviate." Harry said, but his wand movement was voluntarily off, as he preferred his own method of removing memories. In this particular case, he stored the memories in the underground case of memories Malfoy wasn't able to tell anyone about. He wanted Malfoy to remember these. It took him a few seconds before he lowered his wand.

"Legilimens." Snape negligently said beside him. The man didn't stay long in Malfoy's new mind, lifting the spell a couple of seconds only after casting it. "Good. You're progressing. Now scoot, he still has cauldrons to scrub for..." he looked at the nearby clock. "Thirty-seven minutes and eleven seconds."

Not daring himself to talk, Harry nodded abruptly and headed out. Once out of sight, he Apparated in front of the Room of Requirements and paced quickly. As soon as the door appeared, he lunged in the room and found exactly what he wanted.

Sand bags and mannequins. Hundreds of them. On most of them, the face was Snape's, with only a few of them sporting Malfoy's, Voldemort's, or even Dumbledore's. Quickly chucking his bag, robes, and upper garments to the side, he flexed his joints and finally

opened the Pandora's box-like memories containing his recently building anger.

And he started to strike.
At the same time...

The SAGES were doing the day's homework, as usual, when several of their members looked up suddenly. They had started to get an angry feeling in the last few minutes, and the feeling had literally exploded. They now knew that it had come from Harry, and they could guess the general direction toward the boy. Wordlessly, they left the other members and left the room through the Library entrance – it was the shortest path to the Room of Requirements. Guiding themselves with the feeling, they advanced toward said room, but stopped suddenly when discovering that they weren't the only ones there.

Dumbledore and McGonagall had just arrived in front of the appropriate portion of the wall, and were quietly discussing the best course of actions to take. Even through the massive walls, the two teachers could hear the shouts and feel the rhythmic vibrations coming from inside, as could the hidden students nearby.

Dumbledore had tried asking Hogwarts about the persons in the Room, but the castle stayed silent.

Harry had long since dropped any kind of identity, focusing on letting his anger out. His Metamorphmagus powers were following his anger, and his chest and arms were now extremely more muscular than before, causing immense damage to the Snape-faced dummies around him. The Room continued to create more as Harry went, making them bigger and sturdier, but it was to no avail. Even those made of solid wood or bricks were reduced into splinters or dust by Harry's steel-like fists.

The Headmaster decided to enter the room. He had to know what was happening in his school, after all. After casting his strongest shield, one that was as efficient against physical attacks as it was against magical ones, he paced to get the door and opened it. The sight that "graced" his eyes was one of apocalypse. Numerous

bodies rested on the floor, most of them clad in black. It took him a couple of seconds to register that these were only dummies. Dummies made of different matters: straw, clay, wood, and bricks. He then looked up toward the only living creature in there. Someone quite small, but with more muscles than Hagrid could claim, judging by the bared chest – and undoubtedly male. Someone who was jumping around in inhuman speed, punching stone statues of a certain Potion Master with a dull sound, repeatedly, until they crumbled under his might. Even the unknown person's shouts seemed to damage the dummies.

Since that person still had his back to him, Dumbledore decided to take a step or two inside the room.

Bad idea.

As soon as his presence registered in Harry's mind, the boy whirled around and, barely pausing, he angrily yelled "Headmaster" and made a gesture with both hands. A very quick succession of punches. Even though the two of them were separated by several feet, yards, even, the magic-enhanced shockwave was enough to push Dumbledore backwards, into the railing, which broke under the shock. After half a second of shocked silence and strained gravity, the balustrade finally yielded and the surprised old man fell back to the lower floors.

McGonagall shrieked and went to the damaged barrier to see the man's state. Despite having fallen three stories onto marble steps, Dumbledore's shield had held, and the man was awkwardly getting to his feet, helped by a group of shocked students. He looked up, and shot a smile at McGonagall, who then looked back toward the source of their problem. She couldn't see it, though, because the Room's door had been slammed shut, merging into the wall again. The shouts and vibration continued and the stern woman straightened up. Dumbledore had been wary of cursing whatever was in the room, but her Gryffindor bravery wasn't going to let her follow the same route. She drew her wand and paced the three required laps.

When the door appeared, she yanked it open and started to use what she knew best – transfiguration and animation – to try to overcome

the angry... teenager? She smirked as the numerous dummies stood and walked toward the person's unprotected backside. However, Harry had a sense allowing him to feel his surroundings, and he knew several dummies were now moving to get him. Thanking whoever was providing him the opportunity of actually fighting his Potion Master look-alikes, he whirled around and charged.

McGonagall noticed something, then. Something that could explain why Dumbledore hadn't reacted more quickly. Whoever was there, that person had his eyes... ablaze.

His eyes were burning, casting what seemed like white-hot tongues of flame around them while not seeming to actually char the skin.

How in the world...

McGonagall's thought took another path when the young man roared the last remnants of his rage to the face of the statues. The sonic wave, enhanced by magic like before, made the few remaining sand bags explode and threw the dummies against the walls, shattering them in the process. McGonagall was sent backwards as well, but she caught a wooden dummy, and successfully stopped her fall before reaching the damaged railing.

Once again, the door had been slammed shut, but there was no sound of fighting behind it anymore. Dumbledore had finally climbed the stairs back to the place, followed by several curious students and a couple of teachers – namely, the Defence ones. While the adults discussed in hushed tones about the eventual strategy to adopt to subdue the man there, a much calmer Harry had Cleaned himself, donned his clothes, and, his bag in hand, had Apparated away. He noticed his friends in the way and mentally asked them to meet in the inter-house study room.

Once there, after having recovered Malfoy's face and identity, the first thing he did was to check Ginny for injuries, and her mind for sequels of Malfoy's mistreatment. He noticed that her mind, while having been properly Obliviated, had suffered and that some scars still showed there. Calming her, he proceeded in healing these to the best of his abilities. Once done, he carefully branched himself to everybody's

minds to keep their feelings in check, and started to recount his earlier findings.

With Harry's soothing influence, Ron was able to stay on his chair. Otherwise, the redhead would have been ready to pounce on the not-so-blond-anymore boy and his greasy-haired mentor. Wearing a self-satisfied smirk and flexing his fingers, Harry told him that the Room of Requirements was now free if he wanted to express his anger by damaging dummies with Snape's face. Several minutes of explanation later, their little group saw Remus and Sirius irrupting in the room, sporting amused smiles.

“Harry, you won't believe what just happened...”
A bit earlier, on the seventh floor...

When Dumbledore paced the floor resolutely, expecting to find an angry man and mannequins behind the door, the Room of Requirements obliged him and created exactly that: an angry man lurking above numerous broken dummies, fire in his eyes and otherwise unrecognisable features. The Room couldn't create life, though, and the created man was in fact a stone statue.

The Headmaster hurried inside, closely followed by his Deputy and the two Defence teachers, the four of them shooting Stunning and Petrifying jinxes to the glistening statue. Of course, a Stunner had never subdued a statue before, neither did a Petrifying spell make it snap to attention, and they didn't start now. The magically-conjured ropes also fell off the oil-covered body, failing to attach themselves. It went on like this for a moment, the four teachers even trying to cast the spells simultaneously for more effect. It was to no avail, though.

When they noticed that the subduing spells had no effect, the four teachers used more harmful ones. In front of their shocked eyes, though, the young man didn't react like a young man. The first of them, a Cutting curse, barely splintered the statue shoulder, and the Explosion curse, later cast by the Headmaster, cracked the stone leg in several places. Under the statue's weight, the leg broke in several chunks, and the whole thing tumbled forward, striking the floor with an almighty crash, and breaking in several parts in the process. The

head rolled forward, before being stopped by one of the damaged dummies. It stabilized in front of the Headmaster, and the oil that had been burning in its eyes had oozed out of the eye sockets in flaming rivulets looking very much like tears.

A long and shocked pause ensued.

The whole happenstance surprised and shocked the four teachers, and, after recovering their wits, they couldn't do anything but prod at the statue and admit their lack of knowledge about what had happened. Dumbledore thought hard about the situation, and recognized that, by expecting the young man to be there, he had involuntarily asked the Room to create that statue, thus causing them quite the scare.

They didn't know about the actual fighter's disappearance, though. Thinking about it, Dumbledore remembered of someone able to Apparate in Hogwarts, and he made a mental note to ask Jerry about it later. Perhaps the mysterious old man would know something...

Remus and Sirius had a faint inkling of who had been the cause of such turmoil, though, and they decided to tell Harry about what had just happened. Using a new version of the Marauders' Map they had re-created in their first months as teachers, they spotted Harry's friends and "Malfoy" in the inter-house common rooms and headed there.

Of course, the story they told brought smiles to everyone's face. After all, few could brag about pranking the Headmaster, his Deputy, and the two Defence teachers – Marauders themselves, to boot – at the same time, even if it was involuntarily.

Looking at the time, Harry checked with Cassie for Malfoy's location. He then excused himself, telling them that he had some reordering to do in his dorm while gesturing towards his own body. They understood perfectly and he Apparated out of the otherwise empty room.

It was just in time, though, as Malfoy was entering the dorm at the same moment. The exhausted boy, not used to physical labour, was

yearning for sleep in his comfortable bed and silky drapes. When he opened the curtains, though, what he found made him recoil so fast that he fell on his fattest end.

“What is it, Anderson? Lost your bed?” Harry asked from his lying place inside the four-poster bed.

“But... it’s mine!” Malfoy complained.

“Correction: it’s mine. Who are you going to whine to, this time? Snape wasn’t very cooperative, as I reckon.” he said, before waving the boy away. “You know where your bed is, Anderson. Leave me my beauty rest, now. As a Malfoy, I have to sleep to rest my sneering muscles.”

Malfoy was getting redder and redder. He took out his wand and threatened Harry with it. “Get out now, or...”

“Or what? You’ll curse me?” Harry asked, before taking a high-pitched panicky voice. “Oh, save me! The half-blood is going to curse me! I’m afraaaaaid!”

“Petrificatus Total...”

Harry smirked. His fail-safe condition seemed to have worked. Of course, he still had prepared a shield, in case it hadn’t. “What is it, Anderson? Can’t finish your curses? Want a private lesson? It’s Petrificatus Totalus.” Harry said, waving his wand with the appropriate movement. “Now, you see? It wasn’t that complicated? You don’t answer? Too bad.”

Harry smirked. Of course, Malfoy couldn’t have answered since he was now lying on his back, Petrified. Noticing that Crabbe and Goyle were approaching, sniggering at the fallen boy, he snapped at them.

“And you! What are you doing here?”

“But...” came Goyle’s most clever answer.

“I’m not your friend, got that in you thick skulls? I just needed some gorillas to seat my hold on the House. Now that you are useless, leave me alone. Or better, yet, I order you to leave me alone. You can go to bed, socialize with the others, for all I care. I forbid you to hurt anyone, though. Understood?” Fetching a memory from Malfoy’s, he added “And don’t think you’ll get my homework or protection again! You should get tutoring quickly, boys, or you will fail. Think about it.”

It took a long time for the goons to process the long diatribe, but, seeing the blond face’s expectant look, they nodded and obeyed, leaving him alone with the other boy. Harry was a little self-conscious at dismissing them like that, but it would also help undermine the real Malfoy’s power base. Speaking of whom...

He sensed the dorm, and, sure that nobody was snooping around, he approached the prone boy. “Forget what I just said to your goons. Do you see what you are to the others? You have felt pain on several layers. Do you wish to stay in this state? Think about it.” he said, before cancelling his spell on the prone boy. He then wriggled his nose in disgust. “And go get a shower; you reek of rotten potion ingredients.”

Harry then returned in Malfoy’s four-poster bed, closing the curtains before casting Privacy and Impervious charms on them. He then enlarged the inside and transferred the additional furniture from his "bed-room" through the gaseous reality. After restoring his own bed to its regular side and removing the Impervious on the curtains, he made sure that no one was there and opened his curtains, in an unvoiced invitation for Malfoy to use the bed and its cotton drapes. He also took care of the trunks: after transferring the content of Malfoy’s in his own through levitation – except the overpriced clothes – he magically locked the expensive container and returned to bed.

Finally, after casting a last Cleaning charm on the whole bed – he really didn’t want to open it to check for wet spots – he made himself comfortable and went to sleep.

Two days later...

The Quidditch game between Slytherin and Ravenclaw started with a bang.

The Ravenclaws had brushed up their strategies, and they quickly started to feint around Bletchley, who missed most of the attempts. The Slytherin Chasers, despite their uncanny homogeneity, didn't have many different tactics, which made their moves easier to counteract on the long run. From the stands, Hermione was also displaying panels with codes which didn't appear to mean anything, but the Ravenclaws often looked in her direction, and Harry began to understand that it was codes for attack formations.

'You witch you.' he playfully sent to Hermione, who smiled back.

He refrained from snooping over her mind but quickly associated codes with formations, and sent his players in kind, forming appropriate defences. Noticing this, Hermione smirked and started to use other codes, and other ones again, and Harry found out that, if he didn't want to be submerged by the Ravenclaws, he had to actually search for the Snitch.

'Just how many codes you have?' he sent Hermione, while expanding his senses around the pitch.

'How many panels or how many plays?' she answered smugly. 'There are several panels for the same play, you know...'

It broke his concentration and he frowned at her. She stuck her tongue at him and quickly changed panels again, and... the Ravenclaw chasers scored again.

After resuming his search for the Snitch, Harry found it... innocently followed by the other Seeker!

'Damn.' he thought, knowing that the Ravenclaws were fishing for points right now. 'Damn, damn, damn.'

'I heard that.' came an amused voice. Hermione's.

As he started a seemingly innocent search for the Snitch, Harry sent a quick message to Tracey. The girl went to the Beaters and repeated it, and the two large Slytherins concentrated their fire on the opposing Seeker, who swerved off course a couple of times.

It was enough for Harry to branch on the chase, though, and he passed over Renata with a whooshing sound. The lithe girl swore and pushed her broom, but it was no match for Harry's superior brand and the Slytherin finally got the Snitch before her.

The final score was 190-190 and the members of both teams congratulated each other. A mere couple of minutes after Harry caught the Snitch, Snape irrupted on the ground and planted himself in front of him, interrupting Harry's handshake with Kerouan.

"What do you think you are doing?" he seethed, grabbing the boy's arm.

"What?" Harry asked, forcefully removing his arm from the man's grasp. "Didn't I catch the Snitch, preventing our team an abysmal loss? Am I not socializing with other Quidditch players, opening to them in order to get strategy hints from them? I though Slytherin meant cunning, not brashness. That's Gryffindorish." he finished with a patented Malfoy scowl, looking at the man up and down.

The move caught Snape's attention as if it had been a slap in the face. The man knew he had been mortally offended, but in so an innocent manner that he couldn't react to it. The true Malfoy, always watching his alter ego, was horrified.

"You'd do well to remember your place," Snape whispered, "or I'll make sure you lose it."

The Potion Master then whirled around and left, robes billowing ominously behind him.

'I wonder if he trained to achieve that effect.' Harry reflected, before smirking. 'I know what would be fun about it, though.'

The pitch emptied slowly, and Malfoy went to Harry. "We need to talk." he said.

"Do we?"

Malfoy merely nodded, his pride seeming to have been swallowed.

"Alright." Harry said, stopping. "What do you want to talk about?"

The other boy looked around. "Not here."

"Afraid?" asked Harry with an amused glimmer in the eye.

Malfoy looked at him in shocked anger, and started to sputter incoherently. Harry grinned, as the censorship he had instated on the boy's memories seemed to hold. Malfoy quickly stopped his retort, noticing Harry's amused expression. "Tonight at 10, music room." he whispered.

Harry nodded absently, and the two of them separated.

After a quiet party held in the common room, the rest of the day passed peacefully for the Slytherins, and Harry found himself in the music room, five minutes before ten. Looking at the few musical instruments that had been either bought or conjured by Dumbledore, he reflected about them. He had often heard people playing music in his travels, but had never been really interested in playing. Harry knew that the doorways of the rooms blocked all sounds and, inferring that he wouldn't be overheard whatever he did here, he grasped a violin and tried to play. However, the screeching sounds coming from the instrument didn't resemble music in the slightest, and he put it down.

"Impressive, really." a voice mockingly said, and Harry whirled around. "I didn't know I could play that bad." Malfoy continued, taking a couple of steps into the room.

"Come on, I know you know you couldn't play at all, even to save your life."

A pause.

“How comes you are here?” asked Malfoy. “I mean...”

“I know what you mean. You think that I’m like you? If you had been facing yourself, what would I have done in your place?”

Malfoy looked down.

“Right.” Harry answered his own question. “You’d have ratted on me. I’m not you, Malfoy.”

“Malfoy? I am Malfoy, now?” the boy asked, looking ecstatic. He took a deep breath. “I AM DRACO MALFOY!” he yelled to the room. Since he was really alone with Harry – the currently blond boy had cast several privacy charms over the room – the mental censorship had lifted.

Harry smirked and Malfoy looked at him, realization dawning on his features. “Oh, darn. It’s only around you?”

“Right in one.” Harry answered, before asking “Now, since you asked for this conversation, what did you want to talk about?”

“It can’t continue like that, Anderson. I’m... You’re ruining my reputation.”

“Tell me something about which I care, Malfoy.” Harry replied curtly.

“But...”

“Same answer as Goyle earlier. Unless it was Crabbe. These two could be twin gorillas, for all I know. Honestly, Malfoy, how could you get yourself such dumb underlings? Whatever, I don’t want you to answer that. I’m ruining your reputation, you say? I’ll tell you something: I am currently taking advantage of your "reputation" and I don’t care about ruining it at all. I am a Slytherin, and I know that, with your reputation lowering, mine will go up.”

Malfoy considered all this, and a wicked gleam came to his eyes. "I could lower yours."

"I could ask Snape for the permission to try the Killing Curse on you." countered Harry, his voice conveying as much coldness as the blizzard. "And, believe me, I wouldn't fail."

Malfoy was shivering suddenly, and it wasn't because of any imaginary cold. "You..."

"You have no idea how angry I was when I learnt you did cast the Cruciatus on one of my friends. No idea." he whispered. "I had to restrain myself or my own spell would have killed you. Fancy a fried brain?"

"You restrained yourself?" Malfoy asked, looking surprised, before wincing at the memory. "It sure didn't feel like you did." he added absentmindedly, looking away. "It was like when Father pu-"

Remembering who he was talking to, he stopped suddenly, slamming his hands on his mouth.

Harry nodded, though. "I know. On top of having read part of your memories, I have also felt your dad's Cruciatus, once."

"When?" Malfoy asked suspiciously, his Slytherin nature returning to the fore. "I don't remember you being near him at all."

"It doesn't matter. The question, now, is: what am I going to do with you?"

"Why?"

"You want your appearance back, but I'm not exactly ready to part with it."

"But... it's mine!"

“Correction: for the moment, it’s mine. Although I could give it back, on one condition.”

“What is it?” asked Malfoy.

“Are you willing to apologize?”

Malfoy looked at Harry distrustfully. “That’s all? I apologize and you give it back?”

Harry acquiesced.

“Err... I guess I should say I’m sorry, then.” Malfoy said, with visible reluctance.

“No, Malfoy. Not like that, and not to me – well... not only. I want a heartfelt formal apology to the twelve persons you have seriously wronged, with explanations about why you did so and written proceedings.”

“Twelve?”

“Yes, twelve. I didn’t speak about the petty offences, Malfoy. For these, you’ll have to deal with your conscience. I possess a good part of your memories, and they are quite... explicit. The persons you’ll apologize to won’t need to be present, but those that are in the castle will be invited.”

“That’s... a lot of people.”

“I also ask that official witnesses be present, in the persons of the Headmaster and your Head of House, at the very least. And you’ll be yourself, obviously.”

“Snape? But... he will... he’ll kill me!” he stuttered.

“He won’t kill you. Not at that particular time, anyways. If your memories are accurate, he actually can’t kill you in Hogwarts. But, if

you want, you can also formally press charges against him at the same time.”

Malfoy paled. “I’ll have to tell about...” he trailed off.

“Yes. The Unforgivables. I think you have the benefit of doubt there, though, being a minor and him a teacher.” Harry said. He then paused for a moment before adding “You could also spend the rest of your life in my body, belittled because you’re not a pureblood, while being refused the possibility to deny it.”

The transfigured Malfoy blanched, shuddering as he was considering the alternative. “No.” he whispered.

“That’s my one and only condition for giving your identity back, with all prerogatives you had before: silken bed sheets, expensive clothes, pureblood circle of friends, and all. Pressing charges against your godfather is optional. Right now, I want you to swear on your magic that these formal excuses will be made by the end of next week.”

A pause ensued.

“I could kill you, now.” Malfoy said, thinking aloud – although it didn’t matter to Harry, who was able to hear internal thoughts as well. “And I’ll only ask Lor- err... someone powerful to restore my face.”

“You could try.” Harry answered. “But, if you win – which is unlikely – you’ll have to find someone to defend yourself against the Malfoys’ family lawyers. And then, you’ll have to escape from Azkaban before going to see that powerful person.”

Malfoy paled again, and stayed silent for a several seconds. “I need some time.” he finally stated, dejectedly.

“Take your time. As soon as you swear, I’ll swap our identities.” Seeing the glint in the boy’s eyes, Harry quickly added “Don’t forget that the oath will force you to make the apology. Don’t think you can skive off by escaping the school, or you’d lose your magic anyway.”

Malfoy's shoulders slumped. "I don't have much choice, do I?"

"You have the choice of living in your current body, trying to adapt to the fact that you won't be Draco Malfoy anymore, or you can simply apologize."

"That's what I said." Malfoy said, before falling in a thoughtful silence.

During the five minutes that Malfoy took to make his decision, Harry focused on his own mind, studying the defending snakes intently and wondering how he could enhance them. The things he had in mind were concerning the poison aspect and their possible inconspicuousness. The first topic made him think about possible infection of any mind invading his own – namely, Snape's – and the second made him start to experiment to make them invisible. He had successfully made them transparent when Malfoy interrupted his thought process.

"Alright." he said.

"Alright for what?"

"Don't make me change my mind!" Malfoy exclaimed jerkily, before extracting his wand, drawing a large breath. "I, Draco Malfoy, swear on my magic that, a week from now, I will have formally apologized to the twelve persons I seriously wronged."

Harry sensed that the boy's intent was somewhat skewed, so, before letting the involved magic settle, he added "All in the same place."

Malfoy grimaced but repeated the sentence.

"With Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape as official witnesses..."

Malfoy winced again but repeated the sentence as well.

"...and I won't let Snape know anything about it beforehand." Harry finished.

This time, Malfoy almost let the sentence pass by, but a quick jab by Harry reminded him of who had the upper hand there, and he repeated the last sentence.

After the last tendrils of magic passed by, Harry looked at the other boy. "See? It wasn't that difficult."

"Oh come on!" Malfoy answered. "You can't understand, you aren't a Malfoy... despite what everyone sees."

"Of course." Harry chuckled, before turning serious again. "Come, now. To change identities, I prefer not having people around."

"People?" asked Malfoy.

Harry didn't answer, looking pointedly at the room's doorway, where a particularly unkempt feline was looking at them, its mouth wide open in what looked like... a silenced but angry meow. Seeing Filch's lantern light approaching, Harry grabbed Malfoy and, knowing that he would modify the boy's mind later anyway, he hurled the two of them in his personal bed-room, where he took advantage of Malfoy's shocked state to Stun him.

He then repeated his previous actions in reverse, giving Malfoy his previous shape and mind before becoming Kentaro Anderson again. While updating the other boy's mind, not forgetting to remove anything compromising his identity, he idly wondered if he could copy or create things like the wizarding oath, but, as he had things to do, he pushed the thought to the side for the moment. His first set of actions was to return Malfoy's possessions, in their original state, and take his own back as well, Impervious charms in place as well. His next actions involved Apparating through the castle and warn his friends about the new change. Once done, he returned to his cotton-draped bed and slept like a log.

The next day...

...was a Sunday, and Harry left the castle in his usual way, letting Cassie report, to whoever asked, that he was in bed.

His first stop was in Geneva, where he met Powell. The spy told him of strange orders being given to Russian spies – and transmitted to the CIA by the planted moles. It seemed that they sought people "playing around with twigs" and several kids mock-fencing with branches had already been questioned about it. Harry immediately knew that it targeted the wizards, and it threatened the Secrecy rule that his previous year's History of Magic lessons had taught him.

Resolving to meet Dumbledore, he thanked Powell and left him to continue his underground work. He then went to Japan, and found that the robots his cousin made were larger and larger. Until recently, James had mainly used Lego bricks to build them, but it wasn't solid enough for his needs, as he now wanted to include a computer inside the robot. It would be a custom-made computer, with a custom-made operating system as well, but James was very enthusiastic about it. And so was Jorg. The two of them were now spending all their free time together, discussing about gears and algorithms and other things related to their domain.

Harry knew he couldn't do much, but, seeing the drawings of the required parts, he proposed several ideas and helped to transfigure several now-useless plastic bricks into custom-made gears and axles, to the utter joy of his cousin. When James repeated, for the fifth time, that a computer was going to move the robot around, something finally clicked in Harry's head.

Copycat.

A couple of Apparation jumps and a brief chat with his electronic double later, Harry told the two geeks about it, and they immediately saw the possibilities.

Harry returned to Hogwarts just in time for lunch, and headed to the Headmaster office afterwards, under the guise of Jerry Homest. The two of them discussed about the problem of muggles actively seeking wizards, and Dumbledore promised him that he'd contact the new

Headmistress of Durmstrang – geographically nearer to the Russian secret services' base of activity – to take care of the thing.

After exchanging pleasantries for a few more minutes, Harry also asked if Malfoy had seen the Headmaster. To the negative answer and enquiring expression Dumbledore gave him, Harry just hinted that Malfoy could need the office to organize a meeting at an undetermined date during the following week. And that it didn't have to be known by Snape. Dumbledore took the hint, and, following a hunch, he asked if Harry knew of the Room of Requirement. Harry had known that the question would be asked at some point, and he looked innocently curious, broadcasting the same feeling.

They parted soon afterwards, Harry leaving a frustrated Headmaster behind.

Four days later...

It was the infamous Weasley twins' birthday – yes, they were both born on April 1st, of course. Two days before, Harry had promised them a circumstantial present, and they spent the whole morning in fear of being on the receiving end of a prank. A relative fear, of course: these two preferred being pranked than writing an essay for McGonagall.

But whatever they thought, the prank wasn't directed at them. Not at all.

At the Head table, a particular teacher – who already spent fewer meals there than his colleagues, and who would subsequently spend even less time there – found his meal a little dry, and he downed several glasses of the wine the house-elves usually served him. Said wine had been tampered with, but it was so unobtrusive that he didn't remark anything at all. Until he stood up, that is.

The Potion Master had the habit of finishing his meals quickly, and he was often the first to stand. The moment he did so, something happened, and both twins received a mental message, wishing them a happy birthday. Over the usual din, they had heard, like everybody there, a particular sound which had quieted the whole room.

Snape had farted. Loudly.

The man had frozen at once, paling dramatically. The room was utterly silent, and he felt his bowels work overtime. In fact, if he didn't go to the toilet soon, farting would be the least of his problems. He took a couple of steps around the table, instinctively making his robes billowing behind him. The curse struck again, and the man realized that it would pursue him. Sniggers started to be heard everywhere, and he looked disdainfully at the usual pranksters. The two Marauders looked genuinely amused, but strangely innocent. That left the Weasleys. He looked at them, but they looked innocent too. Well... they always looked innocent, especially after playing a prank. But it was a guilty innocence, while, now, they were like everybody, sniggering without restraint.

When Snape turned to the staff door nearby, he found it gone.

The doorway had gone, leaving a smooth stone wall in its place. Snape prodded it, but it didn't seem as though the door was hidden in any way. It had simply disappeared. 'Damn castle!' Snape mentally swore, knowing that Hogwarts had the habit of moving things unexpectedly.

He turned toward the large doors, on the other side of the room, and, gathering his courage and dignity, he walked the length of the Great Hall with his robes doing their usual windswept move. However, associated with the degrading sound resounding at each step he took, that move was rendered utterly ridiculous. Along the way, the sniggers around him transformed into chuckles, then outright laughter.

He was just passing the door when he heard a taunt from the room, freezing him in place, fury and shame etched on his face.

"That's why his robes billow!" someone yelled, and Snape's head whirled toward where the voice came. Recognizing Harry in his line of sight, he almost went there, before remembering his current predicament.

He left, vowing to take revenge, and the whole room exploded in laughter behind him.

The Weasley twins would get dreadful marks for their next Potion assignment, but they didn't care. Harry's gift had produced such a school-wide laugh that Snape wouldn't be able to make his robes flow without a few students tittering behind him.

Despite the fact that the twins never copied or repeated a prank twice, they were also interested by the recipe Harry gave them afterwards – a slightly magically-enhanced muggle laxative.
The next morning...

“ATTENTION! ALL STUDENTS MUST GO TO THEIR COMMON ROOMS!”

The booming voice woke Slytherin house at the wee hour of five in the morning. Bleary-eyed and yawning widely, they obeyed, some of them donning their Hogwarts robes in the way, while others went in their pyjama.

In the common room, they noticed that the source of the sound wasn't a magic speaker but their House ghost, the Bloody Baron. And, next to him was... Snape. A smirking, revenge-hungry Severus Snape.

“Thank you, Baron.” he said, not even looking at the ectoplasm.

“My pleasure.” the Bloodied ghost answered, before stepping back.

“You wonder why I called you here?” Snape asked. “I'll tell you. There's a traitor in our ranks.”

At that, mutterings were heard in the crowd. The man wasn't finished, though. “To find him, I'll search through your possessions. You will all stay here, under the Baron's watch.”

Harry was now fully awake, and knew exactly where it was headed. Inching toward the back of the crowd, he immediately warned Tracey and, as soon as Snape closed the second year boys' dorm door behind him, she sat down and spoke, grabbing the attention of

everyone present. “Well, it could take quite a while. Why don’t we play games?”

The others looked between themselves, and a good part of them agreed. Soon, Exploding Snap decks and other games were taken from the drawers around the common room tables.

While Tracey distracted everybody, the ghost included, Harry had disappeared from the back of the room, and had gone straight to his dorm. Snape had opened his ramshackle trunk and had thrown everything out. Each and every single garment. Low-class clothes Harry had transfigured just to fill the trunk, in order to appear normal.

While Snape was doing so, eventually checking for magical hiding spaces in the container, Harry didn’t lose time and went to his bedroom to shrink his additional furniture – he was becoming quite proficient at that – and to stow them in his locket. After giving the enclosed space its usual size, he dispelled the Impervious charm and Apparated out.

It was just in time, though, because Snape had finished searching the trunk and was angrily moving the curtains, searching for the entrance. Harry returned to the common room, and, noticing a chair where he could appear unobtrusively, he slowly Apparated on it. Using Ravenclaw’s ring, he transfigured his hankie into a book, and plunged himself in it.

“Anderson!” an angry voice exclaimed, and he looked up. His least-preferred teacher was hurrying out of the dorm towards him. “What are you reading?”

Harry closed the book, looked at it innocently, and then back at Snape. “It’s a book, sir, but I’m not reading it.”

“I know it’s a book, you nitwit, and it doesn’t surprise me that you can’t read from it. Give it to me!”

While Harry stood up to give him the offending item, Snape addressed him again. “Where are your affairs?”

“My... affairs, sir?”

“Your books! Your uniform! Your cauldron!”

“But...” Harry started. “Weren’t they in my trunk? I stowed them there yesterday!”

“I only saw these rags there.” Snape said, throwing some of the offending clothes on the floor in front of Harry. “Where’s the rest?”

“I don’t know, sir.” Harry replied, playing the distraught theft victim. “I must have been robbed...”

Using his own budding peripheral Legilimency, Snape prodded the outskirts of Harry’s mind, but it didn’t reveal anything else than what his eyes showed him: a distraught student.

The teacher scowled. “Let’s hope for you that you find them quickly.” he said, suddenly smiling in a sickening way. “After all, it wouldn’t do to be expelled because you just don’t have your school material.”

Harry started to panic. Well... he appeared to panic for the outside eye. Snape scowled again, though, and left it at that. He then looked at the book in his hands. It looked very old, and its title was making him curious: "Hogwarts: my history."

He opened it, and, to his surprise, the large book was full of... blank pages.

“What is the meaning of this?” he whispered dangerously, before drawing his wand on the book. “Finite Incantatem.”

Nothing happened.

“It is a diary, sir.” Harry said, negligently playing with a quill. “I was just starting it. I intended to write about today’s wake-up call.”

Snape looked as if he had just swallowed something bitter. 'A bitter pill for a bitter man.' Harry thought. The Potion Master then threw the diary on Harry's lap, before departing from the room, the House ghost on his heels. After a few minutes, most of the disgruntled students returned to their dorms in the hope of catching a couple hours of sleep before breakfast. Harry knew what was in his dorm, though, and he let the others navigate their way around the discarded clothes, preferring to play wizarding games with his few Slytherin friends.

After casting a glance at the second years' dorm, Garnet approached Harry.

"You've been robbed, Anderson?" he quietly asked, more to ask details about it than to confirm the question.

Harry's answer, then, surprised him. "Of course not." the boy replied, equally quietly. "I just don't want Snape to sift through my personal belongings. They are called personal for a reason."

"Alright. Have you seen the dorm?" At Harry's shake of head, Garnet continued. "It's a mess; your stuff is sprawled everywhere. You need a hand to tidy them?"

Harry shook his head again and played a couple of cards before resuming the whispered conversation, a smirk on his face. "These are not my stuff. If you have to know, it's just clothes I transfigured from debris, earlier in the year, when Malfoy was being a pain in the rear and was trapping my trunk every other hour."

Garnet smiled. A true smile, not the usual Slytherin guarded smirk. Harry smiled as well, knowing that he could trust the prefect to a higher degree than most of his Housemates.

"I don't know why he targets you," Garnet continued, "but you should be wary of Snape. Play low profile for a time. There have been stories in the House, and I don't want to see them being true."

"Stories?"

“Of Snape torturing students.”

Harry frowned. “And nobody told Dumbledore?”

“The stories include the discoverer telling Dumbledore, only to be rebuked. As though Snape had more power than the Headmaster.”

Harry nodded pensively. “Thanks, Garnet. I’ll be cautious, now.”

The older boy nodded as well, before leaving towards his own dorm.
That Saturday...

Snape looked at Dumbledore, displeasure evident in his features. Since he wasn’t the only teacher there, though, he couldn’t do anything but complain. ‘Trust the Headmaster to get his Head of Houses together at an unexpected moment!’ he thought. And the old man was absently stroking his phoenix, whistling a tune under his breath.

“What are we waiting for?” Snape asked aloud, for the third time. The others looked curious as well, as Dumbledore had yet to explain the reason for the midmorning meeting.

“Patience, Severus. I think the reason will present itself quite soo-”

Someone knocked at the door, interrupting him.

“Just as I said. Enter!”

The door opened, and several students entered, all of them sporting equally curious faces. There was just one of them with a different expression. Draco Malfoy was pale, but looked resolute as well.

“What is the meaning of this?” asked McGonagall.

“I thought it was a Head meeting.” Flitwick piped in, while Sprout looked at the assembled students in puzzlement.

“It is not, actually.” Dumbledore said, before conjuring seats for the students. He nodded at the result, showed them the newly-created chairs, and sat down. There was one less chair than there were students, though, and everyone looked around the half-circle wonderingly, until they noticed that Malfoy didn’t seem to actually want to sit.

Dumbledore grabbed a magic Quick-Notes Quill, designated to write everything that was going to be said, and activated it. He then looked around and spoke. “Now that we’re all comf-”

“What is the meaning of this?” Snape exploded. “Are we in a kind of trial? Alb- Headmaster, I remember that you relegated House discipline to the Heads, and-”

“On your request, Severus. Patience, now. Everything will be explained soon. Mr Malfoy?”

The addressed boy was looking straight over the Headmaster’s desk, through the window. He was trembling slightly, more so since Snape’s interruption, but his voice was steady. “I have come here to seek forgiveness.”

“WHAT?” Snape yelled, getting to his feet at once. “What are you-”

“Severus, please sit down.” Dumbledore said. Seeing that the Potion Master was going to rip through the trembling boy anyway, he added something that he was sure would report his ire to him. “Sit down, my dear boy.”

Snape looked up suddenly, and his onyx eyes sparkled malevolently. He sat down, though, and moved his glare to Malfoy, who studiously avoided it.

“I seek forgiveness for things I did. I know I seriously offended some of you, and perhaps you won’t forgive me or even believe me.” the boy said. He seemed reluctant, though, and Snape jumped to his feet again, drawing his wand.

“Stupefy.” he said before anyone could have moved. “Headmaster, this boy is evidently under Imperious, or it is an impostor. No Malfoy would lower himself to publicly apologize in that way. It’s humiliating.”

“Be as it may, Severus, I have reasons to believe the boy is truthful. Since you doubted his sincerity, though, I can give him some Veritaserum.” Dumbledore answered, taking a vial of the well-known truth serum from a drawer and putting it on the table.

“Err... No.” replied Snape, his previously red face noticeably lighter. “I’ll do something else, though.” he said, before pointing his wand at the blond boy.

“Finite Incantatem.”

The spell intended to dispel any glamour or concealing charm the blond boy might have had on his body – so as to reveal the fact that he was really Draco Malfoy. It didn’t give anything, and Snape was tapping his wand to his other hand pensively.

“I’d like you to sit down, now.” Dumbledore said. “Oh, and please wake Mr Malfoy.”

Snape looked ready for a murder, but he didn’t have much choice. Apart...

“I know! He’ll write his name with his blood! Anything written in one’s blood must be the truth.”

The suggestion earned him glares from everyone, especially since Blood Magic was on the borderline to the Dark Arts. It didn’t seem to faze the Potion Master, though. He woke Malfoy and, before anyone could react, he sliced through the boy’s palm and filled a standard quill with the dripping blood. He then gave the boy a parchment and demanded that he writes his name on it.

Malfoy didn’t know what was happening since he spent the last minute unconscious, and he was shaking in fright at the direct order

from his Head of House. He obeyed and wrote "I am Draco Malfoy" with his blood.

Successfully.

Nothing untoward happened, and the Potion Master slumped back on his chair. He wasn't a Seer, but he still had a bad feeling about the whole meeting, especially as he had already remarked that there weren't many Slytherins among the students, and none of them were close friends to the blond boy.

"Shall we resume?" asked Dumbledore. "I think that Severus just helped Mr Malfoy prove his identity and free will. Now, Mr Malfoy was speaking about seeking forgiveness... What for?"

The now-blond-again boy looked at his Headmaster. "I ask forgiveness to... Ginny Weasley... for casting the-"

"Stop!" Snape interrupted. "What are you trying to do, Draco?" he asked.

"Please, Godfather." Malfoy said, surprising a few students. He looked Snape in the eye for the first time since the meeting started. "I have taken an oath to ask forgiveness for my deeds. I must continue."

"You fool!" the Potion Master seethed, approaching the trembling boy. "Why in the nine levels of Hell did you take that bloody oath?"

Despite being shocked by his godfather's outburst and language – and a little disturbed by the spittle coming from him – Draco tried to answer truthfully. "I don't know."

"WHAT?" Snape yelled again. He huffed a couple of times, looking between the boy and the Headmaster. The Headmaster didn't have his usual twinkle or his customary genial expression, and Snape deducted from the old man's curious face that he didn't know about it either. 'So it's not the old fool who turned Draco.' he thought, not a little surprised. 'Who? And... how? I thought we strengthened his defences, the Dark Lord and I.'

He aimed his wand at Malfoy. "Legilimens."

To his dismay, the boy's defences were the same as before, and he quickly escaped the slithering snakes there. Ignoring the enquiring gazes around him, he frowned. Only Dumbledore was proficient enough to possibly bypass the boy's defences, but Snape knew that, despite his unnerving way of always browsing peripheral thoughts, the old man wouldn't push without a good reason. And he would certainly not rebuild the defences afterwards. Snape frowned. Either there was another powerful Legilimens around, or... Malfoy lied.

"Write that!" he ordered, giving the blood-half-filled quill back to him. "Write that you don't remember why and to whom you gave the oath."

Draco looked around, but the others looked either stumped or curious, or mildly angry at Snape for pushing him this way. He complied, and Snape looked at the written sentence intently, trying to see if there was any possible misinterpretation.

But there was none.

"Now, without further interruption, can you finish your sentence?" Dumbledore asked. "Why would you ask forgiveness from Ginny Weasley?"

Draco resumed his previous stance, looking outside. "Because I cast the Cruciatus on her."

"WHAT?"

The little office exploded in shouts, people jumping to their feet and yelling at the blond boy. Even Snape. Especially Snape, it seemed. Dumbledore hadn't moved, though, and was looking at the scene, taking in the people there. Ginny had paled a bit, but she hadn't moved.

"Sonorus." he whispered, pointing his wand at his own throat. "SILENCE!"

The office quieted somewhat, and Dumbledore – after cancelling the spell – looked at Ginny. “Do you confirm?” he asked in a regular voice.

She opened her mouth, but Malfoy interrupted her. “She can’t. I Obliviated her.”

Once again, the noise rose to an unmanageable level, and Dumbledore repeated his injunction.

Sensing that his control over the situation was failing, Snape stood and looked at Dumbledore in the eye. “I won’t accept hearing such nonsense anymore, Headmaster. The boy’s mind has been tampered with, and even through Legilimency, I can’t enter it in these conditions. I ask for a recess, so that I can look at it in detail. Next thing, he’ll say that you asked him to so that he stays out of trouble!”

“It wasn’t the Headmaster.” Draco said, but his voice was now trembling as much as his body was.

Snape whirled around. “Who, then? Enlighten us, please. Tell us who you want to shoulder whatever hypothetical crime you just accused yourself of.” he drawled, mocking the boy.

Malfoy looked down. “You, sir.”

“Me? You dare accuse me?”

“Severus...” Dumbledore tried to interject.

The Slytherin Head was too far gone, though. He whirled around, addressing the assembled students and teachers. “If this little runt thinks he can insult me without proof, I’ll expel him faster than you can say-”

In looking around the room, Snape had seen each and everyone, and his rant was interrupted by a strange thing. Not unusual, but he had never been fond of students interrupting his way of questioning.

Kentaro Anderson had his hand raised.

The others, drawn by Snape's surprised look, noticed the boy as well, and Dumbledore addressed him. "Do you want to say something, Mr Anderson?"

"Do you have a pensieve, sir?"

The old man's eyebrows shot up. Quite taken by Snape's tirades, and hindered by the power the Potion Master had on him, he hadn't actually thought of anything to prove Malfoy's words. Now that he thought about it, the idea struck him as the best solution. Especially as a pensieve could make the difference between dreams, modified memories, and real memories of past events. His own pensieves, for instance, when prompted to show the memory – rather than immersing oneself in it –, showed true memories in silver. Dreams were shown in blue and faked memories in red.

"You... Why..." Snape stuttered, before turning to Dumbledore. "I don't think it's a good idea, Headmaster."

"Why, Severus? A pensieve is a good tool for this kind of job, don't you think so? We just want to see how Mr Malfoy's memories have been updated – I'm sure they have been tampered with, mind you, but I want to know to which point."

"No." Snape whispered, approaching Dumbledore. "I don't think so. And I don't want to. I'm sure none of us want such parody of justice, you included."

"Are you the Headmaster?" someone asked, and Snape whirled around. He noticed that several students looked in the same direction, and his gaze focused on a smirking face.

"Anderson." Snape sneered. "I should have known. Only you can have enough cheek to interrupt your betters talking. I'll take 20 points for that, and you'll serve detention with me after lunch."

“As I asked earlier, sir, are you the Headmaster?” Harry said with a poker face. “Because only the Headmaster can remove points while we sit in his office. It’s in Hogwarts, A History, sir.”

“That will be enough, Anderson!” Snape exclaimed, approaching the annoying boy.

Harry wasn’t fazed, though. “I asked the question earlier to enquire why you didn’t want to see the truth in Malfoy’s words. I for sure don’t want to be the target of such an... Unforgivable... spell. In fact,” he continued, paling suddenly, “I don’t remember such a spell being cast on me, but... what if I have been Obliviated too, like Ginny?”

Snape, redder and redder from the boy’s words, tried to interrupt him. “Enough!” he spluttered “That’s preposterous! I...”

“If you don’t want this inconsistency to be cleared, I will never know if my exhausted state after my detention with you was due to scrubbing cauldrons for four hours, missing dinner on the way, or if I have been subjected to... something else.” Harry finished, taking advantage of the man’s unstable state to stack as many accusation as he could.

Snape’s face had gone through almost all colours on the red side of the rainbow, and was now peeking near the violet side. “50 points! And detention with me for a month!”

Harry looked at Dumbledore. “Did I read it wrong, Headmaster? Can he actually give me detentions and take points here?”

Dumbledore frowned at the question, but a look at one of his artefacts confirmed it. “Severus, please refrain. I don’t know why you are angry, but-”

“I’m not angry.” Snape assured, draping himself in dignity.

Harry wanted to taunt the man a bit more, by telling him that his little brother acted more convincingly, but he refrained. After all, everyone

present had sensed the Potion Master's anger and noticed the childish reaction.

"Nevertheless." Dumbledore said, before leaning to get something heavy from the bottommost drawer. When he stood again, he was carrying a stone basin with numerous runes around the top. He then concentrated, and put two memories in the bowl.

"Here are two memories, one is forged and one is not." he said, before tapping the pensieve with his wand.

A one-foot high silvery Snape rose, crossed his arms, and said "I'm not angry." in a squeaky voice.

Several persons chuckled, but a glare from the Potion Master kept the offenders quiet.

The second memory was of the same Snape moving his arms to the side, and flapping them like wings. While the Potion Master's body was silver, his arms were of a deep red, indicating a modified memory. Harry immediately understood that, to have been able to fake a recent memory so quickly, the Headmaster was quite skilled in Occlumency. Continuing this line of thoughts, he was rather glad to have obtained answers concerning the Prophecy the muggle way rather than risking his mind and life by trespassing in the old man's mind.

"Now that we know how to distinguish false memories from the truth, let's have a look at what Mr Malfoy wants to show us."

Malfoy approached, his wand already on the side of his head. He slowly drew a large silvery blob, and Harry immediately knew something wasn't quite right. Because he had used his pensieve a couple of times already, he knew what the regular "outside" size of a memory blob was, and that this one was much larger than usual. He hurled his mind into Malfoy's, quickly levitating over the defending snakes and the tower walls, and landing in the inner courtyard – he knew the boy's mind as if he built it, which was actually what he had done, a week before.

When he entered the other boy's consciousness building, he found that the memory had almost been dropped in the pensieve. Taking the commands, he brought it back to the head, under the Potion Master's snappish remark about him lying. "It's too large." he made the boy say. "I'll refine it a bit."

And he did. The memory came back to his head, and he knew he had taken the right decision. After all, seeing himself curse himself – Draco's memory of Harry-as-Draco casting the Cruciatus on him – would have raised too many questions. Harry cropped the memory, removing that part altogether, and providing only the scene with Ginny for the others to see.

While Harry returned to his body, Malfoy was moving the memory towards the pensieve again, but Snape had other ideas. The Potion Master had been standing on one side of Malfoy, opposite his seat, and he went to sit there, forcefully pushing the boy on the way. The memory fell on the cluttered desk, and, watching from the corner of his eye, Snape refrained from smirking. His non-smirk transformed into a real grimace when he noticed that the memory hadn't splashed as envisioned. It had stopped falling a fraction of an inch from the tabletop. Recovering his usual face, he mentally cursed Dumbledore for surrounding his desk by unknown charms.

Unbeknownst to him, Harry had trained his wandless levitation since his early childhood, and he had grasped the falling blob before it splattered into oblivion. Snape seemed to be the only one noticing, though, as almost everyone was frowning at him. Draping the shreds of his dignity around him, he looked back haughtily, internally wincing as Malfoy recovered the memory with his wand, putting it in the large basin, which Dumbledore activated.

They all watched the tiny silver coloured scene, horrified. They saw Snape Petrifying Ginny, before giving her as test subject for Malfoy to cast the non-lethal Unforgivables. Even if the scene was small and the voices squeaking, the girl's screams of pain hurt the ears of everyone present. The subsequent Obliviation was the straw that broke the camel's back. Ginny slumped down, crying. Colin Creevey, who was sitting next to her, took her in his arms, and she grabbed

him as if he was a lifeline. The students looked at Snape and Malfoy in horror, the ones sitting close to the former even leaving their seats. The adults looked at the Potion Master in fury.

“I can explain.” the man started, trying to ease the imminent retribution. “I was training him to play the perfect spy for the Death Eaters. Albus! You know things these don’t, I’m telling the truth, I swear!”

“Very well.” Dumbledore said, raising a placating hand to prevent the angry persons there to express themselves for the moment. In a voice as cold and cutting as an ice sword, he addressed his Potion Master again. “Swear on your life that you expressly trained Mr Malfoy for that particular job.”

Snape saw his exit door, and, standing up, he took his wand out, shuffling his memories in the process. “I, Severus Snape, swear I specifically trained Mr Malfoy for that job.”

When the magic oath settled itself, the man was still standing, and almost sneering.

“Not so fast, Severus.” Dumbledore said. “I know your strengths, and I’m not satisfied with your wording. You know what I mean. Do it again.”

“I...” Snape started, his face contorted. “...can’t.” he finished.

Dumbledore stood up, and everyone could feel the magic radiating from him. The supposedly most powerful wizard in the world looked at his Potion Master, his eyes blazing in anger.

“Out. Everyone.” he said, looking at Snape, who understood that the two words weren’t for him. He visibly recoiled from the infuriated glare, while the others left the room, throwing him last glances where anger, contempt, disgust, and horror prevailed.

Under the pretext of going to the bathroom, Harry Apparated back in the Headmaster’s office, staying in the gaseous reality. If Snape

decided to use his last trump card, he wanted to know. When he arrived, he saw a kind of scolding session he didn't want to experience, and learned numerous expletives he hadn't suspected the elderly man to know.

Dumbledore was yelling at Snape non-stop, his anger and words impacting the younger man as though they were physical blows. It was only the Headmaster's respect for human life that prevented him from taking Snape's right then and there. After twenty minutes of magic-enhanced yelling, Dumbledore stopped, and, looking at the man in front of him, he wondered what to do with him.

"Please... Headmaster." Snape said, gasping for breath. "You don't... want to... fire me."

Even if he understood the man's meaning, Dumbledore could have fired him right there, and it would have been the least of his worries.

The main problem was that, factually, Snape was the only British Potion Master available for the moment. There were a couple of promising prospective Masters, but they were taken by their studies, and couldn't prepare potions for a whole school. Dumbledore could get rid of Snape altogether and buy potions from the outside, but it was going to augment the entry fees dramatically, and it could throw out people like the Weasleys. Since the Founding of the school, there had always been a Master living there, and they had always had an apprentice with them. Snape had taken an apprentice, true, but, judging by the revolting scene everybody had witnessed, it wasn't for brewing potions.

And there was the problem of the Potion classes also. With only two months and a half left, Dumbledore would be hard-pressed to find a proficient teacher, available and willing. He straightened up and decided that he would call his outside contacts for this. As the Chinese elder told him, there were other countries aside Britain in the Wizarding World. Unless he was ready to take in some of his old acquaintances again... Even if he didn't like them on a personal level, there were a couple of people quite able to take Snape's position.

Finally, Dumbledore remembered that Snape was spying on the Death Eaters for the Order, and he preferred to keep him at his side than letting Voldemort have him to create potions for his troops.

“You are not fired...” Dumbledore started, earning him a half-smirk from the Potion Master. “...from your Potion Master job.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“I thought you were intelligent, and that your hearing was good. You won’t approach children anymore, Snape. I won’t allow it. You will be confined in your quarters which will be expanded with a Potion laboratory in a few days. Only house-elves will see you for your meals, and if you mistreat them too, they won’t come back. Now, since you were so proud of practising an art not needing a wand, I want you to relinquish your wand.”

“But...”

“You are in no position to negotiate!” the old man yelled. “Give me your wand!” he exclaimed, magic lacing his words.

Snape complied, and Dumbledore looked at him with an inquisitive look. “Do you have other wands?”

“No, I...”

“Could you swear it?”

Snape blanched. Living without a wand, even for a Potion Master, was going to be difficult. He didn’t answer, and picked two wands hidden in his pockets.

Dumbledore looked at him questioningly again. “Can you swear you gave me all your wands?” he asked, before amending his words, thinking of all the possible interpretations. “All the wands in your possession? Whether here or stashed away in your quarters?”

The scolded Potion Master jerkily drew a wand from his right boot. Grabbing it so hard that his knuckles were white, he temporarily considered using it on Dumbledore, but the old man had his own wand in his hand already, ready to defend himself. He relented and spoke in a shaky voice. "I, Severus Snape, swear that I have only this one wand in my possession."

He then threw his last wand on Dumbledore's desk, a feeling of nakedness taking hold of him.

"This conversation is not finished, yet." Dumbledore said, standing up. "But I think your... charge... invited more than Miss Weasley, and I wonder why. Even if you'll hear everything, I won't allow you to interact, now." the old man finished, his wand aiming at the shocked Potion Master. "Petrificatus Totalus."

Harry took it as his hint to leave, and he Apparated back to the toilets, only to find Tracey there. The girl had visibly been waiting for him, and he thanked her before accompanying her outside. The small crowd was currently entering the gargoyle stairs again, and the two Slytherins followed suit.

"Now that everyone is settled," Dumbledore started, ignoring the angry gazes thrown at the Petrified Potion Master and the curious expressions aimed at him, "let's allow Mr Malfoy to complete his oath. For the record, I'll say that Mr Snape had been discharged of his teaching and Head of House positions."

Since Snape seemed powerless now, the addressed boy fared better, and he asked forgiveness from all of them, detailing his crimes on the way. They all learnt that he had put poisoned cat food in McGonagall's classroom, earning the Animagus a sickness that lasted a week. He had tripped Flitwick, making him fall a couple of marble stairs and breaking a couple of bones in the process. He had cast the Imperious on Colin to make him try to kill Kentaro, for which he asked forgiveness from the two of them.

When he finished, he was the recipient of several shocked, angry, and confused stares.

Draping himself in his usual haughtiness, although it was subdued by his earlier revelations, Malfoy looked at them. "As I said, I don't expect your forgiveness. I had to ask for it, and it's done. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

Without a look at the room's surprised occupants, he went to the door, only to find it locked.

"Mr Malfoy!" Dumbledore exclaimed. "Please wait a moment; I have something to say for everyone."

The addressed boy turned around, his gaze locked at the Headmaster. "Sir?"

"Since Mr Malfoy has willingly and formally apologized to each of you here," the old man said, looking at the assembled people in front of him, "I ask you not to exact any kind of retribution. Forgiveness is something that will be hard to give, if ever, but I don't want anyone to start an open war in these walls."

They all nodded, and Dumbledore unlocked the door, letting Malfoy leave the room with a last nod.

It took the remaining group a few minutes to process everything that had been said and done, during which Dumbledore deactivated the Quick-Notes Quill again – he had spared the item from jotting down his verbal lashing at Snape, or the poor thing would have burst in flames. The group then started to discuss the event, and Dumbledore assured them that, while being kept in the castle for security reasons, Snape wouldn't be in contact with them anymore. The students slowly trickled out of the office, some of them throwing a last glance of contempt at Snape in the way.

When the only people remaining were adults, the Heads looked at Dumbledore questioningly.

“Albus, what Malfoy did was very brave. Very... Gryffindorish.” McGonagall said, finishing her sentence with a smug look at the Petrified ex-teacher.

“As I recall, he didn’t have much choice.” the Headmaster replied.

“That will be the talk of the school.” Sprout stated pensively. “And you will have to find someone to replace Severus.”

“Since there’s no Slytherin in the staff anymore, we can perhaps ask someone else to head the snak- I mean... the Slytherins in the meantime?” Flitwick piped in. “I mean... until you find someone to replace Snape in that regard.”

“Do you have someone in mind, Filius?” asked Dumbledore. “At this point, I am open to all suggestions.”

“We could go over all the staff members, but I think someone like Sirius Black would be the best to herd them... if he agrees, of course.”

“I’m not sure about that, Filius.” stated McGonagall. “Between him and Remus, I’d rather have Remus at that position. He’s less... inclined... to take advantage of it. Not in the way of Snape, no!” she quickly amended. “I just don’t think that putting that Marauder at this place is a good idea, that’s all. Remus will do fine, though, despite his condition.”

A few seconds of silence passed by, and Dumbledore went to the fireplace. “Nothing like the present.” he said, before throwing Floo powder in the hearth.

He invited Remus to step in, and the werewolf complied, curious about the invitation. Remus then noticed Snape’s straight posture, and the Headmaster’s following question brought home the feeling that something horrible had happened.

“We are one less teacher and Head of House, Remus, and I will need to recruit someone. Can you lead the Slytherins in the interim?”

“What happened?”

“Well... it seems that it will be the talk of the school for a few days-”

McGonagall snorted, interrupting him. “Months.” she said.

“For a few months, then.” Dumbledore amended. “Draco Malfoy had formally asked forgiveness for his deeds.”

“What?”

“You heard me, Remus.”

“But... what were these deeds? And what’s the link with Sniv- err... Snape?”

“It seems that Mr Malfoy, under Snape’s tutelage, has cast several Unforgivables on other students.”

Remus was shocked into silence for several seconds. “Shouldn’t he be expelled?”

Dumbledore sighed. “He could be, but the apology was done formally, and he has the extenuating circumstances of having been led by an adult.”

“So, Snape has been... expelled?”

“Not exactly either.” Dumbledore winced, noticing the werewolf’s anger. “He will be confined to his quarters, though.”

Remus nodded absently, considering the situation and the request. “Why not Sirius?” he asked, before amending himself automatically. “Of course not, he’d change their house colours to pink.”

While the others smirked at the idea of a pink-robed House, Remus continued to ponder the request. After a full minute, he acquiesced.

“Great!” Dumbledore exclaimed. “I can announce it at lunch, then. I was wary of leaving them without supervision.”

The meeting ended, and everyone went to their quarters, leaving the Headmaster to deal with Snape.

Dragging him through the Floo towards the Potion Master’s quarters, Dumbledore then blocked the fireplace access before putting the man in his bed. He then cancelled his Petrifying spell, keeping his wand trained at the man. As expected, Snape roared his indignation at being humiliated that way, and it took all Dumbledore’s willpower not to curse him again. Instead, he repeated that the man had brought it on himself, and that he couldn’t complain about his treatment. Dumbledore then left the man’s quarters, magically locking the door on his way out. As Snape didn’t have a wand, the Headmaster knew that he wouldn’t leave his quarters anytime soon.

At lunch, the Headmaster’s announcement about Snape being relieved from his duties met a reaction from the student body. A reaction that wasn’t unexpected: a massive cheer resounded in the Hall. There were many Slytherins who breathed in relief too, despite the knowledge that they wouldn’t be unduly advantaged in potions anymore.

The following afternoon, Malfoy was the butt of many jokes, and he locked himself in his bed. Remus tried to ease the situation, but several Slytherins took advantage of the man’s unease in his new job to hinder him. After Harry told Remus of who hindered him and why, several detentions were given – with Filch – and Remus finally settled his authority.

Sunday, one week later...

Standing at his office’s window and a smile on his lips, Dumbledore was looking at the students outside.

“What do you think about this muggle tradition?” he asked.

“I think it’s a playful recreation for the younglings you have the charge of.” answered the man behind him. “And I see that you have Summoned a few of them here.”

“Of course. I had to taste them. I prefer my lemon sherbets to these chocolate sculptures, though. Want one?”

“No, thank you.” Harry answered.

He had deemed useful that he’d meet Dumbledore in Jerry’s shape, to enquire about the progress in calming the Russian secret services. His meeting with Powell, that very morning, had shown that the trails to twig-weaving persons stopped short, and agents were returning to their headquarters with their memories missing. He had wanted to broach the subject with Dumbledore, but the man had been looking outside again, admiring the students hunting for Easter eggs and other chocolate delicacies.

“I wanted to talk with you about the situation in Russia.” Harry finally said, earning him a penetrating gaze from the Headmaster. “My contacts told me that the wizards Obliviated the agents, but that’s not enough.”

“Not enough? Why so?”

Harry sighed. It wasn’t going to be easy. “These muggles have devised methods to Oblivate, too.”

Dumbledore looked at him with his eyes wide.

“Yes.” Harry continued. “They call it "brainwashing", and the people we talk about – not the general population, mind you: these people are more like the Unspeakables – well, they are starting to suspect something, seeing their agents with little memories of their original mission.”

“What can we do, then?”

“I think there should be a team in Durmstrang – or here, or wherever it needs to be; perhaps in Moscow, even – which would be specialized in memory changes. No brutal Obliviation, but only slight changes so that the agents will lose the wizards’ tracks without obvious traces. As it is now, we are raising their interest even more, and the Secrecy is threatened. One last thing that has to be done, too, is to find the person or group behind that all-of-a-sudden witch hunt and change their memories too. And the wizards treating that problem should be well-educated muggleborns.”

“I can understand your ideas – well, most of them – but... why muggleborns?”

“Because these people that are after us use muggle contraptions to memorize their missions. If we don’t send muggleborns, we’ll overlook these, and the witch hunt would start again.”

“That will be a problem, then. I mean... if we host that team at Durmstrang.”

“Why?”

“They don’t accept muggleborns.” Dumbledore said, looking down. “Eastern European muggleborn witches and wizards are redirected to Beauxbatons or here, but most of them decide to stay where they are, and end up as Squibs, their talent untrained and wasted.”

Harry looked at the man in shocked surprise. “But... that’s horrible!”

“I know, I know. I hoped that the current Headmistress would reverse the tendency, but the staff is quite vocal against this, and... Well, I won’t enter a political discussion if I can avoid it. To return to the topic at hand, I’d just say that it’d be better for the... team you spoke about to be located in the town you just named. It’s a town, right? Motown, was it?”

Harry chuckled lightly before correcting the Headmaster, and the two of them spent a couple hours setting up the team’s objectives, before separating.

That evening, Harry went to bed with a smile on his lips. His problems were solved or on the process of being solved. In the midst of the night, though, something happened to deny that.

Screaming in pain, he woke up suddenly, holding his bloodied forehead with both hands.

Not all of his problems were solved.

Far from it.

To be continued in next chapter: Troubles Ahead...

Snappish snappy Snape is gone,
Although things are not yet done.
Something wicked this way comes,
And threatens people's freedoms.

Chapter 24 – Troubles Ahead

posted November 26th, 2005

He was in a long tunnel. It was a dark place, and he didn't remember how he had arrived there. One thing he knew, though, was that he was moving along it, dragged by an unknown force. An unknown force with an underlying tint of anger, which raised exponentially as he approached the tunnel end.

He was stopped suddenly when exiting the tunnel, reeling at the change of speed. He felt as though he had entered someone else's head and been stuck behind that person's eyes. A person standing on a high pedestal, judging by the angle he had over the scene. A little overpowered by his recent and involuntary trip, he took a couple of seconds to absorb his surroundings. He was seeing a large room, with numerous statues of snakes.

Several persons were there, undoubtedly wizards and witches, judging by their ample robes. The brown robes seemed to be embroidered with greenish snakes, until he found that these were real snakes there. The robes also had hoods so large that he couldn't see the face of the persons there. They were standing in a half-circle around something... or rather, someone. It wasn't easy to tell, but the crumpled heap in the middle belonged to a person.

Harry focused on it, and reeled in shock when he realized what it was exactly.

There lied an almost-naked female, her robe in tatters around her. Her skin was marred with numerous bruises and gashes. And she was alive, too, her breathing weak and ragged. Under Harry's gaze, an unseen force sent her crashing against a stone statue, and she whimpered.

A booming voice then echoed from everywhere. "That's what unfaithful followers will get from now on! I told you to warn me as soon as things happened! Why did you wait so long to inform me?" it rhetorically asked, while the woman was brutalized some more.

Harry suddenly understood the voice was Voldemort's. He was in Voldemort's head! He turned around, a part of his mind frantically searching for an exit, while another paid attention to his surroundings.

Visibly, since the woman's wounds had been inflicted by the Dark Lord's new magical powers, Voldemort wasn't limiting himself to purely magical means of punishment anymore. The Dark Lord was addressing the bloodied woman again. "You are going back there today, and you'll get in contact with... him. Don't fail me again, though, because you are not irreplaceable. You should be thankful, too: next time, I shall take your life as well. Am I not merciful?"

The skinned woman coughed some blood, and weakly answered "Yes, my Lord."

Harry had found the tunnel entrance again, and had recognized the feel of it. If what he thought was correct, his own mind was on the other side. He froze, though, when he heard the follower's weak answer.

He had heard that voice before!

But where?

Curious about it, he tried to return to Voldemort's vision centre, but something slithered in the Dark Lord's mind, and, not wanting to take any risk, he hurried through his exit.

The last thing he heard was the Dark Lord yelling the same question again and again, his followers cheering on him.

"I AM NOT MERCIFUL?"

A short time later...

After the Dark Lord's rant at her spy, the room had emptied, and the Death Eaters had taken the woman with them. Voldemort's powerful tail angrily lashed around while he slithered towards his resting place, still wondering about his new body.

Since he had traded his spirit existence for the half-snake body, the Dark Lord had changed his habits as well. While he didn't eat that much before, he could now ingest a whole medium-sized animal – or human, he reflected – and let it be digested in his belly. After the first time, though, he refrained from repeating the feat. That first time, the digestion process caused a two-week lethargy that was unbecoming to a Dark Lord.

Nagini had been invaluable. The serpent's consciousness had been preserved, and Voldemort often retreated to his own mind to have a chat with it about the serpentine body. Thinking of the snake, a questioning presence made itself known in his mind, and he retreated there to see what was annoying the snake.

Half a second and a piece of information later, though, he shot upright, and yelled so loud that his followers heard him, several rooms down the hall.

“POTTER!”

A week later...

During the exile of the Dark Lord and his subsequent rise in power, the Death Eaters hadn't attacked anyone or anything in England, and the Law Enforcement personnel had thought that the troubled times were over and dealt with.

When an old muggleborn wizard was found dead in Knockturn Alley, some even commented on it by saying that the man had got what he wanted. In the middle of a meeting with the political advisors he had started to consult a year ago – after Lucius Malfoy had been exposed as a Death Eater – Fudge went even to the point of saying that “only pureblood wizards are powerful enough to defend themselves when going there.” In the same breath, the Minister had a few shots against Harry's articles, which he dubbed “a falsity appeal for tears towards the most impure blood.” Fudge and his advisors laughed at this, before ending their meeting.

However, on the course of two weeks, several other cases popped up. In each of them, muggleborn wizards and witches were found dead in dingy places, even in muggle towns. The Aurors began to feel

restless: there was no message, no meaning, and, kept in the dark, they could only react after the deeds. Now that there were several bodies, people started to discuss, establishing theories behind the murders.

In the last days of April, Amelia Bones entered the Minister's office unannounced, a folder in her hands. Fudge had his head in his fireplace and, sensing that someone was in the room, he cut the conversation short.

"What do you want?" he asked testily, before puffing his chest in self-importance. "I was just in the middle of a conversation with... never mind. It was important, though, and I hope what you bring is worthy of my attention."

Bones internally rolled her eyes. 'The man has really lost it.' she thought, and the prospect of whatever she was going to reveal didn't appease her in the least. "The legal Healers just finished inspecting the victims, and they have found a common trait. All of them have a fresh tattoo on the arm, in the shape of a snake, and all died of snake venom."

"So what?" asked Fudge. "Since they have those tattoos, it means that they belong to a secret society of sort, right? So it's only natural to see them going down to an enemy gang."

Bones was dumbfounded. "Did you hear what I told you at all? They were recent tattoos! It could just be a mark of the killer!"

"Still, you don't know about it." Fudge countered, showing bits of his devious logic. "I don't care about it, though. My advisors told me the base of the voting population is the purebloods, and therefore, what happens to these mudbloods is none of my concern."

"But..." said the stern woman, completely taken aback at the man's gall. "If it is the job of a serial killer, there will be more, and-"

Fudge interrupted her with a wand gesture. "As I said, I don't care. Since you are here, now, I personally order you to cease all investigation about this. I need the Aurors for something else."

"What?" she asked, referring to the order.

He didn't understand it that way, though, and explained his last sentence. "I will go to Diagon Alley tomorrow, to meet the people our wizarding world is made of. I'll need the top of your people, Amelia, and with their nicest uniform." He smiled self-indulgently. "After all, I am the Minister."

His eyes at the suddenly stuttering woman in front of him, but his gaze focused somewhere else, Fudge suddenly asked something else. "Do you think that Metamorphic Auror can come, too? I think it would be good for the public to see their leader accompanied by a feminine figure." With a leer, he leaned forward. "Is she really able to change all her body?" he whispered.

Amelia Bones was thoroughly shocked. The last shred of respect she had for her boss had vanished in the last couple of minutes, replaced by a cold anger. "She's not available."

"Make her be." Fudge said, before turning to the fireplace, a look of longing in his eyes.

"I can't. She's on a long-lasting mission." Bones replied. She had had several discussions with Dumbledore recently, and she knew Tonks was really on such a mission despite it being for the old man, not her.

Fudge whirled around, a nasty gleam in his eyes. "Recall her, then. What do you think I pay you for? Lounging around?"

Bones recoiled at the verbal onslaught, as if the man had slapped her in the face. White as a sheet, she wordlessly turned around and left.

The Minister's last words followed her out. "I'll send you a memo with the measurements I want from her."

She hurried toward her office and placed a very important fire call, intending to repeat her findings to a man who could act somewhat.

Someone else acted as well: Ryan Phillips, one of the Healers working on the dead bodies, sent his findings to the Daily Prophet in the hope of gaining a couple of Galleons to pay his gambling debts. The story would be published, of course, and several people wouldn't like it.

Not laughing anymore, the Minister would do what anyone in his situation would do: covering his ass. Invoking lack of results from her department, information leak, and resistance to his direct orders, he would fire Amelia Bones from her position at the head of the Department of Law Enforcement, putting Ursinus Derrick in her stead.

The big and blond man, despite his brutal face, was one of his most efficient political advisors, and the Minister would think that he would work well with him. And work well it would, true, as the muggleborn murders would stop suddenly.

Fudge would congratulate himself for the move, unaware of the long-term implications of hiring a Death Eater at such a position.
Hogwarts, May 1st

Since Easter, Harry had been plagued by headaches. He knew their source, though, and it disturbed him.

Voldemort.

Or rather, the stone ball imprisoning his end of the tunnel towards the Dark Lord's mind.

The Dark Lord seemed to have discovered the channel in his mind, and had been pouncing through it since then. Harry's mind prison held true, but he spent more and more time reinforcing it in the mornings, repairing the cracks and checking his mind's integrity. It seemed that Voldemort was stronger, now, and Harry didn't want to see his mind taken over by the Dark Lord.

Despite his persistent headaches, Harry had pushed the "active" part of the Quidditch team to work harder on their strategies, preparing for the upcoming game against the Hufflepuffs. Since Snape's removal, Malfoy had recovered his circle of friends, but they were more and more isolated from the rest of the House, and Harry had assumed practical captaincy of the team.

The game was an onslaught, and would be called like that in the school's logs. The Hufflepuffs, despite fighting valiantly, scored only eight times. On top of that, their keeper unluckily got smacked in the face by a Bludger, and had to leave the field. During the timeout, an imposing seventh year Hufflepuff was drafted to replace him, thanks to the fact that the school didn't use professional Quidditch rules – which normally prevent such an exchange. The newcomer wasn't as trained, though, and let even more attempts pass. The final score was of 430-80. For Slytherin.

The game done with, and the ensuing party finished, Harry decided to take some time to rebuild his Voldemort-related prison. He had had some moments of distraction during the game, and had let a couple of attempts pass at that moment. He delved into his mind, trying to imagine a way of stopping the mind attacks altogether.

He soon found himself in front of said prison. The ball of stone had been enhanced by numerous steel bars, Harry having tried to keep the overwhelming power in place. It hadn't worked, and the boy decided that he'd have to try a more permanent approach.

After all, with a stronger Voldemort on the other side, Harry couldn't invade the Dark Lord's mind like before. He knew that the last time had been a unique occurrence. With his link to the man useless, he decided to try getting rid of it.

After reinforcing the bars, Harry went inside the prison, stood to the tunnel entrance, and focused his power, bringing most of it into his hands. It started to build slowly, a white light surrounding his palms. When he felt that he couldn't hold for long, he extended his two arms forward and, his body taut to expect the recoil, he spoke one word.

“Reducto.”

Harry fell unconscious, magically exhausted, and he wouldn't wake up before Monday morning, 36 hours later. Then, after checking the state of his link to Voldemort, he would be deliriously happy despite his weakened state.

At the same time...

The Dark Lord wasn't happy. He knew that his link to the Potter brat had been activated at least once, and he couldn't enter the boy's mind. It seemed that some nosy Legilimens had built a door-less stone cell there, and, try as he might, he hadn't succeeded in breaking it. He didn't know where the boy was, but, judging by his own lack of power in the boy's mind, said boy had to be far away.

It didn't prevent Voldemort from trying, again and again.

He was moving along the tunnel between their minds, again, when he suddenly felt a great power coming from Potter's end. He decided to be cautious, in case people like Dumbledore were now guarding the boy's mind actively. Even if he knew it wasn't possible – unless Snape had lied to him about Dumbledore's obsession and lack of information concerning Potter's location – he still didn't want to be caught unaware in a powered-down state.

He was at the two-third of the way when he heard a faint word, coming from his destination, and he froze. That was totally unexpected, and he turned around to flee what he knew was headed his way.

The spell caught him in the middle of the tunnel-like mind link, forcefully shoving him forward. The blast also cracked the tunnel's walls, and they promptly collapsed, bringing an end to the link's usefulness.

The next morning, the Death Eaters would find their master unconscious, a state that would last a whole month. Thinking that Voldemort's inner snake was hibernating – despite being in May, in a warm country, and in a properly heated building – they left him like that.

When Voldemort would eventually wake, he would punish them dearly for not having tried to wake him up magically. This done, he would prepare his next move even more carefully.
A month later, in the evening...

Dumbledore exited Snape's quarters and closed the door, repeating the locking spells before slowly walking toward his office. It had been almost two months since the Potion Master had been imprisoned there, and the Headmaster still hadn't got any clue about the blackmail material the Slytherin had on him. He had tried persuasion and threats, and had even successfully entered the man's mind, but there was no clue about a failsafe mechanism linked to that material. Dumbledore suspected that Snape had put it into someone else's control, someone that would check on him periodically, and it irritated him greatly. The year was drawing to a close, and he suspected that, if Snape wasn't free at that moment, he would find his numerous prestigious positions threatened. He had grown accustomed to them, and, with Voldemort silent – undoubtedly preparing something big – he didn't think it would be a good idea for him to step down. Especially not in a forced manner.

While the old man was walking away from the dungeons, a hidden shape was surveying his progress. Even when Dumbledore turned the last corner towards the stairs, the person didn't move, not taking any chance. At least five whole minutes after the man's disappearance, a specially-charmed invisibility cloak was removed and a woman stepped out of the recess in which she had been waiting. Silent as night, she stretched to ease her cramps, before heading to the Potion Master's doorway.

Using a specifically-prepared emerald, she chanted an activation spell, and the gem absorbed the charms around the door. She swiftly opened it and entered, before closing it behind her and pressing the gem on the middle of the door. It reactivated the spells, and she turned around, taking her surroundings in.

The Potion Master was lying on his bed, visibly famished. The room was unkempt, and the adjoining Potion laboratory hadn't been used

in a long time. She cautiously approached the apparently resting man until she could see him face-to-face.

Onyx eyes opened and peered at her for half a second. Recognition appeared on his features, and his arms shot up, taking hold of her throat.

“How stupid.” he wheezed, before being taken by a coughing fit. Despite the pain, he didn’t relinquish his grasp.

“Please.” she said through her constricted windpipe. “I’m... on... your... side.”

“Explain.” he said, releasing his grip by a tad, and she felt that he could strangle her in a jiffy if he so chose. Only curiosity prevented him from doing so.

“Our Lord sent me.” she said, and both understood the same thing as to who that lord was. When he released her, she conjured two glasses of water and he gratefully downed one.

“You?” he asked in a normal voice.

“You didn’t think that a double agent wouldn’t be spied upon, did you?”

“I thought... students... Draco...” Snape started, before trailing off.

“Well, as you know already,” she started, frowning, “the little brat is a traitor, and he will face his responsibilities in due time.”

“Can you get me out of here?”

“Not now, I’m afraid. Our Master hadn’t expressed any wish concerning you.”

“Why not? I mean... I have a shot at Dumbledore! I should-”

“He is hibernating.” she stated, and he looked at her in astonishment. “So said Travers, and I’m not questioning his Inner Circle.”

“Can you, at least, bring me my wand? Dumbledore has it.”

She looked at him, appraisal etched in her expression, before nodding. “I’ll do what I can.” she said, before going to the door.

“Wait!” he asked.

“What?”

“Obliviate me, or the old fool will find about you in my mind.”

Knowing that he was lowering his defences so that the Obliviation would work, she nodded and spoke the curse. After looking at his unfocused eyes a last time – that particular spell involved a recuperation time of a few seconds – she went to the door, recuperated her gem, and left.

June 4th

The exam frenzy had just settled down when the last of them ended, that Friday afternoon. Bleary-eyed students were meeting, discussing about their answers in hushed tones. Madam Pomfrey saw herself give even more doses of Calming Draught than during the exam week. But it was customary. What wasn’t, though, was that her stock of potions was dwindling dramatically.

It was night time already when the last student left her ward, and she knew none should appear after curfew. Deciding to treat the potion problem immediately, she called Dumbledore’s office and found the old man with Professor Sinistra, discussing about the Astronomy practical exam – which had been difficult for all the students involved since it had been a cloudy night.

“Poppy?” asked the old man in surprise. “To what circumstance to we have the pleasure of your call?”

“I’m sorry, Albus. Can you come check the infirmary’s Potions stock? When you are finished, that is.”

“We were done, I think.” Dumbledore said, looking at Sinistra for confirmation, and the woman acquiesced before heading out.

After the Astronomy teacher had passed the door, Dumbledore went to the fireplace and flooed to the Hospital Ward. Sinistra hadn’t left, though.

She had waited behind the door, and, hearing that the Headmaster had left, the woman re-entered the office surreptitiously and started to search through the old man’s drawers. Using magic, she quickly found the thing she sought.

Snape’s wand.

She knew very well how it looked – after all, she had spied on the Potion Master for quite some time – and had transfigured some spare twig into a fake wand closely resembling it. She quickly grabbed the wand and replaced it with the fake one. It wouldn’t fool anyone touching it, or even looking it closely, but a cursory glance wouldn’t reveal the theft. She didn’t know what to do about the other wands, but, as she wasn’t on a leisure cruise right now, she decided not to dwell on it. She closed the drawer and exited the office.

After putting her invisibility cloak on again – she already was Silenced –, she hurried through the corridors. She couldn’t be seen or heard, but she still could be sensed or bumped into, and she avoided people on her way. Filch and Mrs Norris were on the prowl, and she took an alternative route to reach the dungeons. Once there, she repeated her previous actions and entered Snape’s quarters. The man seemed healthier, although he was lying on his bed again.

This time, she didn’t approach him, and repeated her reasons for being there. He seemed angry at having been Obliviated, but he quickly reasoned with himself that it had been the best course of

actions. Especially as the Headmaster had continued to explore his mind between the woman's visits.

Visibly relieved, Snape grabbed his wand and threw a couple of spells on himself to try it. A Cleaning charm and a Shaving charm later, he was already rummaging through the few potions that were still stocked in his study. He mixed a couple of them and drank the resulting bubbling concoction. Under Sinistra's eyes, the man suddenly seemed to exude energy, and she reflected that it must have been a personalized and enhanced Pepper-up Potion – which it was: all Potion Masters knew how to personalize potions; and the fact that the potion had been stored in two parts had the double advantage of being fresh upon mixing them and being unrecognizable as single potions.

“I'm going to our Lord.” Snape said. “What I have on Dumbledore is too important to be left in less worthy hands.”

They both left soon after, Sinistra silently walking the castle, heading for her quarters, while Snape ran toward the Entrance Hall, firmly intending to escape what had become a hell-hole to him.

Contrarily to the previous Astronomy exam, the night sky was clear, the full moon fully visible. Thinking that he would be an all-too-easy prey if he stayed fully visible, Snape Disillusioned himself before walking toward the Forbidden Forest. Despite its closeness, he didn't aim for Hagrid's hut because of the half-giant's habit of prowling around his wooden house at that time.

However, something happened and he stopped.

In front of his surprised eyes, the Whomping Willow suddenly stopped moving its branches around, and a trapdoor opened. A trapdoor he had long since associated with dread. The two Defence teachers, slightly drunk, exited from it in their human forms, before unsteadily walking toward the forest.

And, despite the full moon hovering in the cloudless sky, Remus Lupin wasn't morphing into an uncontrollable beast!

It was food for thoughts, and Snape was ready to let the two of them to their own devices, but Remus suddenly stopped and slowly turned around, his nose in the air.

‘Shit!’ thought Snape. ‘Damn his werewolf senses!’

He saw Remus looking his way, the man’s eyes squinting and his wand in his hand. Snape knew that his particular concealment spell was useful as long as no one knew he was there. At that moment, Sirius had turned as well, and had his wand out, looking hesitantly between his friend and the empty space Remus was looking at.

Deciding not to take any chances, the Potion Master spoke his favourite spell.

“Sectumsemptra!”

The two men looked at the curse and reacted a bit late. Remus’ quickly-cast shield took the brunt of it, though, leaving him with numerous but shallow slashes – which started to heal immediately. Sirius had jumped out of the way, but his leg had been touched, and he was bleeding heavily. The two of them fought back, though, Remus dispelling whatever concealment charm was in the area in front of him while Sirius sent a wide-area Cutting curse. Soon, spells were exchanged quickly between the three men, something which drew the attention of several people.

Usually, a duel of two people against one was unfair, but not in this case. Because of the Marauder’s slightly inebriated state and because the Potion Master had been properly energized beforehand, the impromptu duel was quite balanced, and none of them gained the upper hand. A mere minute after its beginning, though, another voice sounded and another curse joined the volley. Towards Snape.

Unaware of the attack, the Potion Master crumpled to the floor, properly Stunned.

“Well, well, well...” started the Headmaster. “I thought he was properly imprisoned. And without a wand, too.”

“It doesn’t seem so.” said Remus, his ears still ringing from the adrenaline rush. “I think he was Disillusioned, but I sensed him and he started to attack us.”

“Too right he did. I may have been a springy mutt before, but I’m not going to jump anytime soon.” Sirius added dejectedly. He had been casting a few Healing spells on his wounds, but he knew he would have to see Pomfrey quickly.

The Headmaster didn’t answer, and looked at Remus suspiciously. Despite their state, the two Marauders quickly understood why. Especially when Dumbledore looked at the full moon and then at Remus again.

“Shit.” they both said, looking at each other.

A short time later, the four of them were back in the Hospital wing, Snape still Stunned on a bed and Sirius being healed by Madam Pomfrey.

“ So, gentlemen, I believe you have something to tell me.” Dumbledore said.

“Well...” Remus started. “It’s a long story, but the gist of it is that I’m not a werewolf anymore.”

The Headmaster nodded. He had already noticed that, and was more curious than shocked by now. “What are you, then?”

“I’m a wolf Animagus. That’s all I can tell.”

“When did that happen?” asked Dumbledore.

Remus thought about it and answered truthfully. “September.”

“And you still went away during full moons, keeping the charade.” Dumbledore said pensively. “You didn’t inform me... why?”

Remus looked sheepish.

“You won’t tell me how you did it?” the Headmaster pressed on.

“No, I won’t. Except that it’s not my deed. Otherwise, I’d have taught the other werewolves.” Remus answered.

“Someone cured you? Who?”

“I cannot say, Headmaster.”

Dumbledore frowned, trying to get his answers in the ex-werewolf’s mind through his peripheral Legilimency, and his frown deepened when he failed. “Have you been Obliviated?”

“You know there’s only one answer to your question, right?” replied Remus with a smirk. “But I can tell I haven’t.”

“Why can’t you tell me who did it?”

“Because it’s a protected memory. I cannot tell you.”

The old man frowned again. How did the man get his memories protected? And how did he get cured of his lycanthropy in the first place? It was supposedly impossible. Unless...

“Have you been in contact with the Dark Arts, Remus?” he asked, his curiosity having morphed into suspicion.

The addressed Animagus looked up and at the Headmaster in surprise. He then snorted. “Of course we have. We teach Defence Against the Dark Arts, after all.”

“And we’ve also eaten next to Snivellus for too long.” Sirius added.

“As least, Severus is a known quantity to me, and I wasn’t talking to you, Sirius.” Dumbledore said, before extracting his wand and aiming it at Remus...

...who recoiled, hands raised. "Hey! What are you doing?"

"I have to check if you haven't been corrupted by the Dark Arts, Remus. As you know very well, the werewolves are considered Dark creatures, and it's strange in itself that you aren't one anymore."

"What part of 'I'm not a werewolf anymore' don't you understand? How do I have to tell you?"

"He tells the truth!" Sirius said, trying to sit up only to find himself maintained in place by Madam Pomfrey's strong grip.

"Mr Black!" she said. "Despite what you think, you aren't in a state where you can move around."

"Why can't you tell me, if you haven't Obliviated?" Dumbledore asked, his wand still aimed at Remus.

The man looked at him defiantly. "Is that it, Headmaster? Are you going to curse me?"

"Only if I have to. Now answer the question."

"So, you are going to curse me if I don't answer your question, that's it?"

"Will you answer or not?" the Headmaster asked, his wand waving dangerously.

Remus looked at Snape's prone form. "And here I thought Snape was the Death Eater." he said, before looking at Dumbledore. "Am I to understand I'm an enemy of yours, Headmaster?"

The old man was driven by his need to know. Dumbledore had had several deadly run-ins with the Dark Arts in his life, and had built a fanaticism against them. Not against all human practitioners, though, judging from Snape's everlasting presence in the school. The old man didn't think it was possible to cure lycanthropy at all, and, since his mind was well-educated in the Light Arts, his only logical

conclusion was that Remus had been cured using the Dark Arts, something that should have left a dark imprint on the man's soul. And he didn't want to take a chance about that – especially after his failure in trusting Snape.

“Legilimens.” he said.

Dumbledore arrived in Remus' unprotected mind, and started to search for the answer to his question. He knew that there were spells preventing people from divulging information, but it had never been an obstacle for an accomplished Legilimens master like him. The only problems would have occurred should Remus have been an Occlumens, and the ex-werewolf wasn't, apparently.

He spent a long time in the man's mind – around an hour, according to the dozen seconds elapsed in the outside world when he got out – but, despite his knowledge at searching through memories, he didn't find anything concerning the person who cured Remus. However, he was now quite sure that Remus wasn't turning dark.

He extracted himself from the ex-werewolf's mind and, returning to his own body, he stowed his wand away. “I'm sorry.” he said. “I thought you were turning dark.”

“Didn't you accept my word?” Remus demanded, and Dumbledore recoiled at the man's vehemence. Remus wasn't a werewolf anymore, but, in moments of intense rage, the remaining wolf spirit gathered behind the Animagus transformation power, giving the man a wolf-like expression.

Seeing the amber eyes mere inches from his own, Dumbledore now realized he had made a mistake. “I-”

“SHUT UP!” Remus yelled, and Dumbledore took a step back. The shout seemed to have emptied Remus' anger, however, leaving a cold determination behind. “Harry was right...” he started, and the old man looked at him in surprise. A feeling that changed in disappointment when Remus finished his sentence. “...we can't trust

you. You charge into the problems without taking into consideration the needs of the people around you.”

“Who is this Harry you spoke of?” Dumbledore asked. “Is he...” he trailed off.

Remus looked at him. “Harry Potter, right. And, by already showing your level of trust in me, you’ve proven him right.” He looked at the old man and sighed. “I won’t continue to work here if this is what I should expect from you.”

“What do you mean?” the old man asked, fearing the probable answer. Sirius looked at his friend intently as well, and Remus sent him a quick glance, during which a current of understanding passed between them.

“I resign.” Remus said.

“Me too.” Sirius added.

Dumbledore looked lost. Madam Pomfrey, who had been ready to scold Remus a while ago, gaped at the news.

“But... you can’t just leave!” exclaimed Dumbledore.

Remus snorted. “Of course we can’t. We’ll honour our contract, but we will leave with the Hogwarts Express. Don’t expect to see us here next year.”

Dumbledore threw a sideways glance at Madam Pomfrey. Even if the school nurse could guess about it, there was no use to just shout about the Order of the Phoenix. He dragged a reluctant Remus to the side.

“And... the Order?” he whispered.

Remus looked at him coldly for a second before answering. “I will continue seeing you as a war general and figurehead in the fight against Voldemort. However, I wish nothing more.”

Dumbledore nodded, defeated, before leaving, Snape's unconscious body levitating behind him.

The next day...

The last Quidditch game of the year was pitting Gryffindor against Ravenclaw. The blue-clad players played their numerous tactics, but saw several of them thwarted thanks to the interaction between Ron and Oliver Wood, the Gryffindor Captain. Between the two of them, the enemy moves were quickly decoded and counter attacks were swiftly organized.

Unfortunately, the Ravensclaws repeated the beat-the-Keeper move the Slytherins had involuntarily done in the previous game. It was executed fairly, and Wood only failed to notice the arriving Bludger. Because of his sudden lack of consciousness, the Gryffindor Keeper and Quidditch Captain fell badly, and broke his arm against his broom. In the same spirit of what the Hufflepuffs had done in the previous game, the Gryffindors called for a time out while their official Keeper was levitated to the infirmary.

After several minutes of heated discussion, everyone followed Ron's advice, and a startled Seamus Finnigan saw himself pulled off the stands, clad in a Keeper outfit, and hoisted in front of the hoops.

"Don't worry." Ron told him. "I'll stay here for a moment for you to get a hand at the game, but you'll see it's quite easy. It much like the pick-up games we already played, really."

"Yeah, whatever. Pick-up games don't involve people out for your blood."

Ron snorted. "Of course not! They are after the points. Just focus on the Quaffle, now, and evade the occasional Bludger."

"Or Bludgers."

“Fred and George will take care of that. Hush, now. Here they come.”

Seamus looked at the flying players in front of him and didn't see the blue robes approaching. Not removing his eyes from the play, he turned his head towards his Seeker. “Are you sure? I don't-”

“Now!” Ron exclaimed, and, true to his word, the opposing Chasers sped towards the hoops, and, Ron and Seamus guarding a loop each, the Quaffle sped toward the third. Seamus instinctively threw his hand toward the Quaffle...

He was sure he would miss it...

He had been quite far from the start...

But his hand grabbed the large ball anyways.

He brought it to him and looked at it in wonder. How had it been possible? He was looking at his hands when he felt a whoosh beside him and heard a whacking sound.

“Careful of the Bludgers, mate!” yelled Fred, before zooming after the other Bludger while George struck the first towards the Ravenclaw Chasers.

As he threw the Quaffle right in the hands of Angelina while Ron – elected interim Captain – was directing the attack from higher, Seamus smiled. That could be interesting, after all...
That Sunday...

Harry looked at the man in front of him. “You what?”

“As I said: I gave my notice. And Sirius, too.”

“But... you can't leave! You two are the best teachers I've ever met.”

“Thank you. Really. But I can't keep teaching in a place where the Headmaster considers me a dark creature and peeks in my mind

uninvited.” Remus started, before sitting in front of Harry at the Silenced table. “It was a weird feeling, you know. Very unlike when you are in my mind. With you, I can barely sense a thing, while Dumbledore is powerfully moving around, and I don’t like the feeling at all.”

“Strange, that.” Harry commented, looking away. “Even if we can ascertain that it’s because of the wand, one could have thought that a century and a half of experience would have softened the edges, but it seems the contrary...” he said, before looking at Remus. “I hope that I won’t be like that when I’ll be older.”

“That would mean much older, cub.” Remus said, and they both laughed.

A week later, in the Headmaster’s office...

Dumbledore looked at the blond boy in front of him – there was no one else in the room – before concluding his offer. “You can refuse, of course, but I’ll be forced to Obliviate you about this offer.”

In a true Slytherin manner, Malfoy considered all aspects of the Headmaster’s proposal. It had its perks, but its downsides as well, the worst of which being his possible discovery by the Dark Lord. He didn’t remember much about Voldemort, but whatever remained in his memory suggested a very powerful being. Perhaps even more so than Dumbledore.

“I’m sorry, sir. I don’t think it’s wise for my health. My... the Dark Lord is too powerful, and he’ll see through the masquerade immediately.”

The old man slumped back on his chair, visibly disappointed. By losing Snape, he had also lost a valuable source of information, even if he now knew that it had been a somewhat unreliable one.

“What could I do to make you change your mind?” he asked.

Malfoy shrugged. "Nothing, really. Either you keep me protected all the time, which means I won't be seeing the Dark Lord again, and it's not the meaning of your proposal, or you Oblivate me completely."

Dumbledore stayed silent for a moment, frowning thoughtfully. "If that wasn't so dangerous for your health, would you agree?" he asked, hope perceptible in his voice.

"What do you mean, sir?"

"You can accept and I'll Oblivate you afterwards. That way, nobody will ever know about your allegiance."

Malfoy looked sceptical. "How would I know I have to report to you?"

"You can drop a memory of this conversation into a pensieve, and you can also write your allegiance with blood on a document I'll keep by myself. Since you are coming back to school next year, you'll see me anyways, and we'll bring the memory back to you."

Malfoy reflected about it. "You'll protect these items, won't you?"

Dumbledore nodded silently, letting the boy think about it.

"And you are sure there is a way for you to win the war?" Malfoy asked.

Dumbledore acquiesced slowly. Had Malfoy been proficient in Legilimency, he'd have picked a feeling of vain hope in the old man's thoughts. A vain hope at getting Harry Potter back in England. If only he knew...

"In the case where you win, you swear I'll be protected?" Malfoy asked.

Dumbledore took his wand. "I, Albus Dumbledore, swear to protect Draco Malfoy from harm after Voldemort is defeated. If and only if Draco Malfoy accepts to spy on Voldemort for me. And I will protect the evidence of his allegiance from discovery and theft."

When the oath took effect, Malfoy seemed relieved somewhat. "Alright. I'll do it. Just show me to the pensieve and let's get this over with."

Dumbledore smiled, not a little relieved. After the boy wrote a letter telling about his recently made alliance, the Headmaster looked at him intently. "I have one order of business before we take that memory from you, Mr Malfoy."

"What is it?"

"You will replace it with something I will give you. It will create, in your mind, a thirst for information about Professor Snape."

"Why?" asked Malfoy, genuinely perplexed.

"For your peace of mind, I can tell you about it now, especially as you won't have the memory afterwards. Professor Snape was in your place, before, but he recently overstepped his boundaries and I need to know everything he does this summer." the old man said. He had decided, a few days ago, that he would let the now-Obliviated spy in the loose in hope it will lead him to where his blackmail material was stored. He had put Tracking spells on him, of course, but Voldemort would surely notice and disable them. That's one of the reasons that had pushed Dumbledore to recruit the blond boy.

After several seconds, Malfoy nodded absently, and Dumbledore looked at him inquiringly. "Any last wish?"

"It sounds awfully like something you'd ask a man condemned to death." the blond boy said with a half-smirk.

Dumbledore looked at him seriously. "Anyone scheduled to stand in front of Voldemort is facing death. Figuratively and literally, and eventually legally. I just hope you'll pass through it unharmed. Now, I need you to lower your defences for the memory to find its way."

As Malfoy nodded again, the old man opened the empty pensieve. The blond boy put his wand to his temple and concentrated hard, closing his eyes. At the same time, Dumbledore was doing the same with his own wand. Letting the boy drop the large blob of memories in the stone basin, the old man put his wand in contact with Malfoy's temple, and the boy shuddered as he absorbed the foreign memory. While Malfoy was doing so, Dumbledore swiftly removed the pensieve from view and stored it in the adjoining room.

When he returned to his office, a confused boy looked at him. "What did you want to tell me about?" he asked the Headmaster.

"Ah, Mr Malfoy. Thank you for arriving so early." Dumbledore said, not skipping a beat. With his benign smile and a twinkle in his eyes, he sat down and addressed the boy. "I wanted to address the issue of your exams."

"My exams, sir?" asked Malfoy, a little disturbed at the man's attitude.

Dumbledore frowned, though, and the genial facade faded in the background. "I am wondering why you got such a low mark in Potions with a Potion Master as your godfather."

"I don't know, sir." Malfoy said, and Dumbledore had a feeling that it was a plain lie. For obvious reasons, it didn't register as such by his peripheral Legilimency.

"Well, I expect that you'll talk him into offering you tutoring sessions this summer, then." Dumbledore said, and the blond boy nodded.

"Will that be all, sir?"

"Yes, Mr Malfoy, that will be all."

And the boy left the room, leaving a satisfied Headmaster behind.

Several minutes later, the Head Girl barged in, panting. "Headmaster! There's an att-

She was interrupted by a loud buzzing sound coming from one of the numerous items cluttering the old man's desk.

A little earlier, in Hogsmeade...

The last few days of the year were often anti-climactic, with students walking around in a dazed state. Some were still taken by the exam frenzy and woke up in fear of incoming tests or plainly babbling data from the courses. Others had sufficiently relaxed to go to Hogsmeade for a day of distraction.

A few days before, however, someone had had an idea to strike even more fear in the hearts of the muggleborns. Strangely, that day, few pureblood students stayed in Hogsmeade for lunch. It didn't make the other students react, however.

As the local clocks struck midday, two dozens wizards Apparated in. They were all clad in brown cloaks with green snake-like highlights, and most of them had a sword in a scabbard latched over the robe. This raised the suspicion of the townsfolk, but these wizards' hoods were lowered, their faces were fully visible, and they were discussing between themselves, seeming to be there in good spirits. The few witnesses of their appearance dismissed the occurrence as a club of fencing of sorts. After all, who would attack people while their faces were fully visible?

The newly-arrived group split, and, in teams of five, they headed towards the most populated sections of the town. The Hog's Head and Madam Puddifoot were the first to be reached, while Zonko's and Honeyduke's, the shops the students preferred, saw their arrival a few seconds later.

Just as the last team reached the Three Broomsticks, half a dozen wizards Apparated in as well. Black-robed individuals with white masks. The few people witnessing their appearance shouted in fear...

...and all hell broke loose.

As the other places would have been overcrowded otherwise, the Hog's Head pub had been chosen by several groups of students to grab something to bite. The pub was closely watched by several

teachers, keeping its usual crowd in check. Having found the Three Broomsticks full, Harry and his friends were there, quietly discussing about exams and summer plans.

In the middle of a sentence, Harry suddenly froze, his eyes wide. He suddenly yelled “DUCK! Everybody duck, now!” while pushing his friends under the table. A split second later, the windows exploded inwards, showering the occupants remaining standing in sharp glass shards. Curse beams shot through the openings right afterwards.

Harry tried to Apparate out, but the gaseous reality had been solidified, indicating an anti-Apparation field, and he mentally swore. Solidifying his skin, he chanced a look outside and promptly ducked an incendiary curse. He had had time to notice the assailant, though, and knew that the brown-clad wizard out there was the same kind than the ones in black he had already met. And he had also remarked that one such Death Eater was arriving as well.

Letting his friends douse the budding fire, he threw a reflecting field anchored on the window frame. He supposed that it might not be sufficient for his purposes, but he could shield against the first few spells. He then threw a couple of spells through it...

...only to notice that his target didn't seem to care about his spellwork. The reason for that was immediately evident, though, as a magic shield absorbed his Stunners. Harry's own shield held true for one Cutting curse, reflecting it toward the Death Eater's shield, but it was promptly disintegrated when the recognizable green beam belonging to the unstoppable – and Unforgivable – Killing curse passed through it.

Harry stood by the side of the window and frowned, concentrating on something. A couple seconds later, his short bow had appeared in his hand. Looking at it, he noticed Tracey and his friends looking at him from under the table, and he winked. He then drew the string several times, an arrow appearing each time. When he found himself with six arrows, he carefully placed them on the string as he drew it again. A seventh arrow appeared, and he carefully placed it in the middle, hoping that it would work – after all, even if he had trained his

multiple-shot several times, it had never been with more than three arrows.

Holding the taut bow horizontally so as to cover the largest area possible, he waited for a lull in the curses before turning and stepping to the side, releasing the string and its deadly load. Continuing his move, he turned and sidestepped the two curses headed his way, and arrived to the other side of the window.

That's when he noticed something strange. The barman, who had looked like a tall and grumpy old man with long grey hair and a short beard, seemed to have straightened up suddenly, and his clothes and hair had been magically altered. He now looked like the Headmaster, with the usual starry purple robes and white hair, and Harry immediately thought that Dumbledore was there in the flesh. However, the man had several differences to the Headmaster, and Harry's peripheral Legilimency allowed him to sense the disparity more acutely.

"Alright, people." the man was shouting over the din. "If we fight back, we'll get out alive."

Harry heard murmurs of "It's Dumbledore!" and "We're saved!" People started to react, some adults taking defensive positions at the windows, using upturned pieces of furniture to protect themselves.

Others took action as well, healing the wounds, herding the children toward the basement, and extinguishing the fires resulting from incendiary curses. Harry could fight, though, and he didn't want to be taken from the front line. Judging by the lack of retaliatory fire from the window he had been shooting through, he knew he had either killed the enemies, or incapacitated them sufficiently. A quick glance through it confirmed it. The brown-robed Death Eater was lying on his back, an arrow protruding from his chest, and the other man wasn't there anymore. The magical shield hadn't stopped the arrows.

Ignoring the shouts from inside, he jumped through the window, mentally telling his friends that no, they couldn't follow. Being inside and fight back was already going to be difficult and deadly and he didn't want them outside and exposed to enemy fire.

Once out of the pub, he crouched behind a few barrels. It was just in time, though, as another brown-robed man was approaching. The man threw a couple of spells through the shattered window before casting another on his dead colleague. Harry had been curious as to why they had their hoods down and he understood why when the illusion was dispelled. Instead of a smiling brown-haired wizard, he was now looking at a grimacing raven-haired – and dead – one.

His bow still in his hand, Harry drew the string and, focusing on merging the arrow and the man. A second later, he released the former and his breath, and the latter fell back, the words of a physical protection spell still on his lips.

Harry now knew that the attackers used illusions, and, inferring that they could turn themselves invisible, he put his magical glasses on. He also decided to alter his appearance, as a mere student downing the Death Eaters was going to be suspicious. As Henry Evans, he tiptoed towards the corner of the building and noticed three other brown-robed "men" – he knew they were under an illusion spell, now, and his glasses allowed him to notice that one of them was a witch. The black-robed one was there as well, his wand held unsteadily in his left hand. Harry drew his bowstring a couple of times again, and released two arrows. One of them struck a brown-robed wizard in the chest, but the other merely bounced off the black-robed one. Noticing this, the Death Eater yelled orders and threw curses at where the arrow had come from while the two wizards hastily cast the physical protection spells.

Thanks to lull in the attack, a volley of spells headed towards the Death Eaters, and Harry then remarked that each of them had a pendant that shone briefly each time a curse struck their dome-shaped shield.

Since the enemies were going to be protected from his arrows somewhat, Harry looked at his weapon dejectedly, and an idea came to his mind. He drew the string again, and, the arrow positioned correctly, he prepared a spell in his mind. A spell he would release through Ravenclaw's ring. Crouching, he waited for the Death Eater

to round the corner. When the man did, Harry released the arrow and the spell at the same time.

It was a spell he knew perfectly, by now.

An enlarged arrow, the size of a ballista bolt, seemed to shoot from the ground toward the man, and, even if it didn't pierce the man's skin, it propelled him into the air, the shock enough to expel the air from the man's lungs in an unmanly yelp. The arrow being much heavier now, even if it kept the same trajectory, the man flew backwards until it impacted a nearby wall. It was enough to crush the internal organs between the solid wall and the heavy ammunition, and the Death Eater died on the spot.

Harry took advantage at the two remaining dark wizards' shocked state to repeat the action, and the last man found himself with an intact skin but a crushed skull, right next to the black-robed Death Eater. Seeing this, the enemy witch panicked, and she grabbed the protection pendant, visibly trying to activate something. However, she was distracted by numerous spells coming from the pub, and ducked the ones with a green beam – later, Harry would learn that Aberforth had used a variation of a household charm designed to clean dishes, which had the only use of producing beams of the same sickly green colour than the Killing curse. Harry stepped out of his corner, took aim, and released the arrow and then the spell. The witch's eyes widened when she saw the projectile heading her way. She made a move to escape it, but the large projectile still caught her robes in the shoulder, and she lost her wand before being slammed on the wall beside her dead colleagues.

Not wanting to be shot down as an enemy from the townsfolk, and not wanting to be an easy prey from the Death Eaters either, Harry ran to the two ones that had fallen first, and he tried to take one of their pendants, remarking that his arrows had disappeared. 'They aren't conjured permanently, then.' he thought, before noticing that the enemies' amulets had disintegrated upon their wearer's death. He knew where to get one alive, though, and headed toward the fallen woman. On his way, he paused in front of the pub's windows. "It's over!" he shouted, and evaded several Stunners sent his way before the people inside started to actually grasp the scene behind him. The

assailants were lying on the ground in diverse positions, either dead or unconscious. Mostly dead, judging by the pools of blood.

Harry went to the Death Eater witch and looked at the pendant. He tried to pry it from her neck, but it wouldn't budge. He dispelled the charm holding it in place and successfully removed it, but it crumbled to dust like the others, its magical link to her extinguished by the removal. He swore in a low voice, knowing that he wouldn't be able to benefit from the protection it would have offered.

He stood up, and, in the relative silence, he heard people screaming somewhere else in town. Just as the first group of cautious men left the tavern – led by the Dumbledore look-alike – he headed toward the main road. Just as he cautiously reached the corner, the old man caught up with him.

“Hey, there.”

“Hi.” Harry answered, before peeking at his future targets. While pulling the bowstring several times under the man's eyes, he continued to speak. “You're not really the Headmaster, are you?”

“Err... no. I'm Aberforth. Ab-”

“Just a sec.” Harry interrupted, preparing for the scattered fire he was ready to launch. While he jumped out of cover to release the arrows, he hoped that the targeted dark wizards didn't have the physical protection spell up right now. Just before taking cover again, he was rewarded from his efforts by seeing several of them fall to his arrows.

“Nice to meet you, Aberforth.” he said, panting slightly. “Nice illusion, there.”

The man nodded, before looking at the bow suspiciously. “Isn't that the weapon that this student used?”

‘Shit.’ Harry thought, before quickly reflecting about it. “A student, you say? I saw a boy running towards Madam Puddifoot, but, in the

confusion, I didn't realize that he was armed. This one is mine, though. It's fairly common, where I learnt to use it." Harry paused and heard battle noises coming from the road toward the tea salon, and he realized that the fight was going on there, too. "I'm about to go there, in fact. Beware, the Death Eaters have protection fields. And, after my attack now, they must have physical protection spells up as well."

The man seemed to think for a moment before smiling. "I have just the thing, then."

"What?" asked Harry, always interested about winning tactics, especially now.

"Excavate the area under their feet and fill it when they're in it."

Harry's jaw was hanging, and the man chuckled for a second before turning serious again. "Do what you have to do. There are wounded people already, and the sooner we repel the attack, the sooner they can get healing."

Harry thought about his friends and his heart clenched, but he nodded grimly. He threw a glance behind the corner and noticed that the Death Eater team targeting Honeyduke's had succeeded in putting fire to the seemingly locked building, and they were joining the team fighting at Zonko's. The joke shop was more difficult to subdue, since inventive students there threw all sorts of fireworks and other joke items toward the enemies. And Harry's fire had been almost forgotten in the surrounding chaos.

"Fire in Honeyduke's. Can you take care of it quickly?" he asked the old man, who acquiesced. "I'm going to remove several of them, first. Follow with your trick, and good luck."

The man nodded and grabbed his wand in a sure hand, while other wizards arrived behind him from the pub. Breaking a run towards the other side of the road, Harry fired another volley of arrows before reaching the narrow passageway between Gladrag's, the tailor, and Scrivenshaft's, the quill shop. Green beams struck the passage's

corner behind him, but he didn't stop there. At the end of the small alley, he jumped over a fence and arrived in the private gardens of Scrivenshaft's. He noticed that Madam Puddifoot's tea room was also on fire, its exits blocked, and the attackers laughing to themselves at the tableau.

In the same way as before, he delivered a scattered attack and pinned one of them with a deadly blow, while two others were wounded and yelped in pain. Taking advantage of their surprise, Harry delivered other arrows as fast as possible. The Death Eaters, not used to such an opposition, seemed to hesitate between casting a shield or an attack spell, and Harry successfully downed another wizard before one of them successfully conjured a wall in front of them. It was an uneven one, but made of sturdy stones, and Harry's arrows couldn't score anymore, even if enlarged. He retreated behind a low wall himself, and quickly considered his options. He didn't have many: the enemy was protected from magic, Apparation was still impossible, and the Death Eaters now had a shield against his arrows.

A shield.

A sturdy but unmovable shield protects anything on a side from physical aggression from the other. So, if anything could explode on the Death Eaters' side...

Explode...

Harry chanced a look over the low garden wall and, before being pushed back by several curse beams, he had just enough time to notice the conjured wall's position. He smiled. The thing was situated exactly like he would have wanted: should anything explode behind it, only the empty garden behind it would be touched. And the Death Eaters.

Harry fished a particular glass box out of his locket and extracted one of the C4-filled pens from it. After concentrating on a trajectory, he activated it and threw it over the walls.

On the other side of the conjured wall, two Death Eaters were keeping an eye on the wall behind which Harry was lying, while the

three others quickly discussed about their options. When one of them noticed that a muggle pen had been thrown to them, he barely had time to think 'Why does he want us to write?' before it went off.

The blast slammed the three Death Eaters against the wall, killing them on the spot. The other two were hit by shrapnel and, blinded by the explosion, they unsteadily walked out of the zone, only to be plucked out by Harry's arrows.

The boy then ran to the tea room, mentally sending his bow back to his trunk on the way. Once at the door, he quickly dispelled the locking charms before helping the occupants to fight the fire and healing those who were critically wounded.

When it was quite finished, he headed outside to clear the fumes from his head, and noticed that several people were turning the corner, the Aberforth guy leading the real Headmaster and a few other peoples toward the tea salon. Harry suddenly remembered his words to the man, and he knew he couldn't find another explanation about Kentaro's disappearance short of Obliviating them all – something he was quite sure wouldn't work with the Headmaster.

He looked around, and noticed that one of the Death Eaters had been thrown backwards, now lying behind a pile of rubble from the damaged shop. Taking his chance, he approached the dead body and repeated the Transfiguration process he once did with Draco Malfoy, taking care to remove the evidence of him being struck by an arrow. He also transfigured the man's clothes into the school uniform – Harry had already changed his own clothes, when he had switched into Henry Evans' persona: it was an automatic process, by now. Lastly, just before being discovered, he transformed a piece of debris into a make-believe bow, with enough differences with his own that no one would make the link.

When he felt the Headmaster behind him, a few seconds later, he stood up and looked him in the eye. "He's dead."

"One more." said Dumbledore, looking distraught at the tragedy that had struck the village.

“How many?” asked Harry. Seeing the empty look the old man sent him, he elaborated “How many casualties on our side?”

“As far as I know, there have been 22 victims, Mr Anderson included.” the old man answered. “Ten of them were students, and the others were townspeople. The students mostly fell to debris and fire, while the adults caught curses while defending against the attackers.”

“You can say Death Eaters.” Harry said, looking at the two other bodies behind him.

“I know, I know.” Dumbledore said, sweeping his hand through the air. “We have yet to identify the others, though.”

Harry looked at him. “That’s precisely what I meant. The brown ones are Death Eaters as well. Well, perhaps they will change that particular name, but they are all linked to Voldemort.” Dumbledore looked slumped, but his eyes searched Harry, and the boy shrugged. “You can check their identities, but don’t forget to remove the illusion spell off their head beforehand.”

The Headmaster seemed surprised for a couple of seconds, and he nodded. “Did you kill them?” he asked, before noticing the bow near the dead body. “And what about the bow? Aberforth told me that you used one?”

Harry concentrated and his bow shimmered into view. “I learnt to use one when I was in Japan.” he explained. “I saw the boy use one, so I deemed it useful, rather than approaching them from a distance. The Death Eaters had a magic field surrounding them, you know?” he asked, and Dumbledore nodded. “It was protecting them from spells but not thrown items.” Harry continued. “I could have used the Unforgivables, but the bow is much quicker to draw, and uses up less magical energy. By the time they realized what I could do, they were either dead or unconscious.” He then frowned and looked at the transfigured body at his feet. “I arrived too late, though. The poor boy doesn’t seem to have made it.”

The old man had followed Harry's reasoning, and there wasn't any discrepancy to be found. Not that he actively searched, mind you, especially as he was mourning the loss of students from his reputedly safe school.

Telling the old man he had to inspect some of the structural damages in the other attack points, Harry took his leave and went back to the Hog's Head, hoping that none of his friends belonged to the death count. He was quite happy that it wasn't the case, and mentally contacted them, telling them about Kentaro's supposed death and his presence as Henry Evans. They looked happy at seeing him, even in another shape, and visibly refrained from showing it through hugs. They still conveyed these feelings mentally, and Harry reassured them the same way.

Harry was returning to the main road when he saw Dumbledore emerging from the road to Madam Puddifoot's. "Mister Evans!" he called.

"Yes?"

"Can you join us in my office, in half an hour, for a debriefing meeting?" asked the old man, having recently learnt a lot from muggle usages.

Harry thought about it. By "us", he suspected that the Headmaster was referring to the Order of the Phoenix, miscellaneous members of which were walking the streets already. "I'll be there." he said, before going to the joke shop to help.

It took more than half an hour to sort the wounded and to leave the case to the few Aurors the Ministry deigned to send. An hour and a few minutes after Dumbledore's invitation, the meeting finally took place. The small office had been magically enlarged and chairs and tables had been conjured, settled as a U-shape in front of the Headmaster's desk.

"Despite the circumstances, I'll say welcome to everyone." Dumbledore said, looking briefly towards Harry, who nodded back.

The few Order members who hadn't realized why the old man wasn't addressing them the usual way for an Order meeting now understood the reason. "Before we start, though, I'd like to introduce Mr Evans to the few of us who didn't participate in the recent battle at Azkaban. Mr Evans helped us by driving the Death Eaters away most efficiently. They were about to escape anyways, but his presence limited our losses."

Harry nodded, blushing slightly. "Thank you, Headmaster." he said, openly wishing that the old man would stop his praise.

The Headmaster then looked at Harry. "Conversely, I'd like to introduce him to the ones he doesn't know yet. Mr Evans, here are Emmeline Vance, Hestia Jones, Amelia Bones, Sturgis Podmore, and Aberforth Dumbledore." he said, finishing in a flourish. "My baby brother."

The named man snorted at the inside non-joke – after 150 years, being called a "baby"-whatever could wear on anyone's nerves. Harry looked at him thoughtfully, now knowing how he could have passed as the Headmaster so easily, back at the Hog's Head.

However, something else had grabbed his attention earlier, and his eyes returned to Amelia Bones. He knew he had read about her somewhere, and tried to fetch the information from his mind, but the meeting started, and he was forced to let the matter drop for the moment.

Dumbledore – Albus – coughed to grab everyone's attention, and the debriefing meeting started. "Today, four minutes after midday, an attack occurred on Hogsmeade. The death toll reached 25 when two critically wounded students and an adult died while we were moving them to the infirmary. We also have 47 wounded persons there, in various state of recovery. 13 out of the 25 victims are townspeople defending their village, and a funeral will be held for them. The remaining 12 are students, like 29 of the wounded. And, judging by the information Mr Evans is going to give us, I'd like to point that all of them are muggleborns."

Dumbledore raised his hands to quiet the volley of questions and sat, motioning to Harry to stand up. "I didn't repeat what you told me," he merely said, and Harry knew he had to go over it again, which he did. When they all understood it was all the work of Voldemort's Death Eaters, it allowed them to understand a bit more about it.

Someone didn't seem to be convinced, though, and stood to voice his questions. "How can you be so sure they are Death Eaters?" Moody asked, his eye rolling around madly. "And how can we be sure you aren't one of them? Constant Vigilance, I say!" he finished, looking around to see if anyone dared contradict him.

Harry looked at the man in surprise. It wasn't from his questions, since he had expected them from the old man. Something else troubled him, and he removed his glasses a second, with the pretence of wiping them. When he put them back, he was sure that something wasn't right with the man. "How am I sure about you not being one of them either?" he countered, absently noticing the man's tiny jump of surprise. "I killed several of them, and I think it's enough of a proof for you."

"How did you kill them?" asked McGonagall. "They were bleeding, but we didn't find anything causing the wounds."

"I saw that Asian-looking boy with a bow, and remembered the set I have. It was particularly helpful, given the Merlin-knows-what kind of protection dome surrounding the enemies."

The people there winced, and Harry caught a few stray thoughts of shame at been forced to use the Unforgivables to repel the attackers. 'If they had known about muggle means, they wouldn't be so torn at using unblockable spells.' Harry privately thought.

"A... bow?" asked McGonagall.

To answer, Harry Summoned his bow again, and pulled at the string, causing an arrow to appear. "This. It throws sharp arrows, which make hole in enemies, if one knows how to wield it. With this one, the

arrows are magically conjured, which is why you haven't found any."

The Transfiguration teacher nodded, but Aberforth had another question. "What about the larger arrows that crushed the... Death Eaters? And the blood prints on the wall that had been conjured near Madam Puddifoot's?"

Harry smiled. "Oh, just a bit of an enlargement spell after releasing the arrow. You see, an item enlarged while moving keeps its velocity. It worked well, even when they were protected against physical attacks as well. It seems that only the skin was protected."

"It's a nice weapon." Moody asked. "Where did you learn to use it? I never saw a wizard with one. It looks like a physical weapon a muggle could use."

"And you'd be right. I learnt in Japan, a long time ago." He frowned. "And I don't see what's wrong with muggles." Ignoring their whispers, he continued. "They have learnt some things that you can only dream about, especially regarding warfare."

"Nonsense!" claimed Moody. "With magic, I can get any number of them."

Noticing that several of them nodded along the retired Auror's talk, Harry looked at Dumbledore, but the old man merely shrugged. Realizing that the Headmaster's discoveries concerning the muggles didn't extend to the members of his Order, Harry turned back towards Moody. "As Mr Dumbledore asked-"

The named man – not the Headmaster but his younger brother – coughed, interrupting him. "As I think you are referring to me, I'd like you to call me Aberforth, or just Abe."

Harry acquiesced, and turned back to Moody.

"As Aberforth asked, I'll also answer to the other question. The... thing... you saw behind the wall was caused by a muggle explosive."

Harry said, and, ignoring the raised eyebrows around him, he looked at Moody intently. "Do you have the slightest idea of what happened in Japan in 1945?"

The man shrugged. "No, and I don't see the interest in this conversation."

"In the contrary: muggles dropped bombs that razed whole cities. Cities the size of London... muggle London."

"Pffft! Their imagination had never ceased to amaze me. You shouldn't take that kind of stories into account, lad, as it's surely embellished. Even magic can't raze a whole city in one go."

Harry stayed there, open-mouthed at the man's refusal. How could he even start to persuade him? He looked at the Headmaster, but the man seemed surprised at his allegations as well.

"I think we are straying off-topic, there." Dumbledore intervened. "Thank you for your intervention, Mr Evans. You have surely helped to drive the enemies away today, saving many lives in the process."

Harry recognized a dismissal when he heard one, and he stood, nodded curtly, and left. Once outside, though, he didn't lose any time and Apparated in the office again, just in time to catch Moody's sentence.

"...that rascal wasn't serious! And we keep bumping into him at every Death Eater attack. I wonder-"

Dumbledore interrupted him. "And it's thankful, Alastor! I know you took a long time to arrive yourself, contrarily to your usual swiftness. Now, if we can switch to more serious business, we have to find where these Death Eaters came from and why they attacked."

Continuing to hear the voices distractedly, Harry reflected about Moody's attitude. The glasses had told him something was wrong, but, judging from the other's reaction during their little bout, he couldn't have said anything against him.

Deciding to do something about it, he pushed at the man's mind, and discovered heavy fortifications. 'Trust him to learn everything he can to protect himself.' Harry thought. Something happened that sent that line of thoughts to the side. Several things, in fact.

A dozen snakes.

Snakes? As mind defence? These weren't the Order's usual animal. Was Moody a Slytherin? Harry froze. Had Moody been taken over by Voldemort? If the Dark Lord was able to change Malfoy's mind, he could certainly change others. As he couldn't dig a tunnel under the man's defences right now, Harry decided to follow him and to see by himself where the man was staying.

In the meantime, Harry returned to his own mind to check about where he had read about Amelia Bones. When he remembered, he frowned: it had been in the Daily Prophet. The article had related her demise from the position of Head of the Law Enforcement Department, and presented so-called evidences about her links with illegal activities. Susan had been quite distraught about it, and she had been mocked by a few Slytherins, until Harry decided to step in. He had made them see their own mother's face whenever they were about to scorn her, and the teasing had ceased. Having noticed the woman in Dumbledore's circle, Harry knew she couldn't be that much guilty of the alleged charges, and it made him curious. He took a cursory glance in her mind and quickly understood that all of it was the Minister's job. How could the man purposefully discharge the perfectly competent woman, that was a question an honest reporter could ask her. Or a Homest reporter, Harry thought, smiling. Ever so discreetly, he obtained the woman's address from her mind and exited it.

As he returned to the gaseous reality of the Headmaster's office, he noticed that the ongoing conversations were related to accounting of the Order, and it bored him quickly. Besides, he had something to do quickly, as an aftermath of the battle: he had to clear his bed-room. After asking Cassie to warn him should the meeting end while he wasn't there, he headed to the Slytherin dorms. Once again, he shrunk and recovered all his affairs before reducing the place to its

usual size. He finished by removing the charms on his curtains and telling Cassie not to report him as Kentaro Anderson ever again.

Harry had checked with Remus that the Heads of House were responsible of collecting the dead students' affairs, and he left his trunk as it was. The Heads also had the unpleasant task of telling the families and sending the bodies to them if they so wanted, and Harry would eventually help him dispose of the transfigured Death Eater body.

After a last glance around, Harry left the room and returned to the Headmaster's office just as the meeting was drawing to a close. He then followed Moody outside, and, when the man Apparated out, Harry followed the disturbance he caused in the gaseous reality until he arrived in a small apartment around London. However, Harry arrived a bit after his quarry, and he found himself suddenly stuck by the anti-Apparation field the man had just cast after his arrival. In itself, it wasn't something that usually caused problems, since he just had to Apparate out of the gaseous reality to move around.

This time, though, he couldn't do it.

His head was halfway through a brick wall, and the rest of his body was outside. If it Apparated in, he'd splinch his head in the wall, and that was definitely not something he was eager to test. He tried to Apparate only his hand to cast an explosion spell on the wall itself – in order to be able to Apparate in wholly, at least – when a disturbing sight graced his eyes.

Moody was talking to a trunk. An open trunk, quite large. Harry immediately thought it was large as a coffin, especially as there was someone lying in it. And that was caused the disturbance in his sight.

It was another Alastor Moody – even without the peg leg and the swivelling eye, it wasn't that difficult to tell.

The standing Moody leaned forward and plucked something from the other man's head before dropping it in the metal flask he always had on the hip. As his ears were still in the wall, Harry didn't hear what they said – what the standing Moody said, because the other one

wasn't speaking or even moving – but he had the distinct impression that it wasn't pleasant for the stranded one.

Once again, Harry prepared to cast the explosion curse on the wall, but something else caught his eyes then, delaying his action again. The standing Moody started to quiver, and he quickly looked at his watch before removing his false eye and leg, throwing them in the trunk which he slammed shut. He then sat, his missing leg regrowing slowly.

Despite the unnerving sight, Harry thought it was the best moment for an attack, and he focused on causing the largest possible hole through the wall. The spell caused a loud bang, and masonry flew everywhere, causing the man he thought as Moody to protect himself from the onslaught. Harry took advantage of that to Apparate in, grab the edge of the hole with both hands, and hoist himself inside.

“Stupefy.” he said, just as the other man was drawing his wand. Struck in the chest, the man fell to the floor, unconscious.

At that moment, Harry didn't have any doubt regarding the fact that it wasn't Alastor Moody at all. He didn't even know him. He suspected that Dumbledore might know about it, though, and he shrunk and pocketed the man and the trunk before leaving the apartment the muggle way. Once he felt he had left the field's area of effect, he Apparated back to Hogwarts and entered the Headmaster's office the normal way – although he just asked Cassie to move the gargoyle aside, that is.

After knocking and being allowed entrance, he noticed that there were two persons there: the Dumbledore brothers.

“Hello again, Mister Evans.” the Headmaster said. “To what do we owe your return here?”

“It appears that the security of your Order is compromised.” Harry said grimly. When he noticed the two men's faces, he chuckled. “Don't act so surprised, Jerry told me about it.”

“What do you mean?” asked Dumbledore.

Harry smirked. “Well, we sat at pub, had a beer, and talked about things. Everyday things, you know: Death Eaters, Voldemort, the Order of-”

“I think we get your meaning.” Aberforth interrupted. “I think that what my ancient brother wanted to ask was related about the Order security, rather than your connections with that... Jerry.”

Harry nodded, and looked back at the Headmaster. “Its members’ identities aren’t checked as they should be.”

“So?”

“Here is the man who just impersonated Moody.” Harry said, putting the shrunk man on the floor and enlarging him.

“Barty Crouch!” exclaimed Dumbledore.

“-Junior.” Aberforth pointed out.

“But... wasn’t he locked in Azkaban?” the Headmaster asked, before shaking his head. “Silly me. He has surely escaped when Voldemort broke his followers out of there. Forget I asked.”

“How did you know he masqueraded as Alastor?” asked Aberforth.

Harry smiled. “I saw him transform back, and found this at the man’s place.” he said, and put the shrunk trunk on the floor as well, before enlarging it to its normal size and opening it. He was rewarded by the two men’s surprised gasp.

After several shocked seconds, the younger Dumbledore brother stepped closer to the unconscious men. “How was he impersonating him?” he asked.

Harry looked at the prone men thoughtfully. “I don’t know, but we can ask Mr Moody about it.”

Dumbledore nodded, and, aiming at the trunk-retrained man, he dispelled the Petrifying curse. They then had a quick discussion, involving snappish remarks from the old Auror as to how traitorously he had been struck unconscious. His recent memories only involved Crouch plucking hairs to put in his flask, filled with Polyjuice Potion. After having proved that his particular motto – Constant Vigilance – had failed at least once, Moody was asked a question by the Headmaster.

“Can I assume that you didn’t ask me to replace Misters Lupin and Black for teaching Defence next year?”

Moody huffed. “Why would I? It’s difficult enough to adapt to the glaringly low level of Auror aspirants – especially now that this Derrick bear is leading them – so... students?”

Dumbledore sighed. “That’s what I thought. It seems that we will be forced to search for someone else, now.” he said, and his gaze landed on Harry, where it stayed for several thoughtful seconds. “Would you, Mr Evans?”

Harry looked at him inquiringly. “Would I what, exactly?”

“Would you agree to teach Defence Against the Dark Arts here, next year?”
At the same time...

Three Death Eaters, barely alive, lied in a pool of blood at Voldemort’s feet. Figuratively, of course, since the Dark Lord didn’t have feet, technically.

“I gave you an easy mission!” he exclaimed to his assembled followers. The three ones at his feet didn’t dare shivering in fear of additional pain, but the dozen others did.

Voldemort had ranted on his followers for a solid hour. His initial anger had abated after the torturing session, and he had discovered that a facet of his new personality – acquired since he had merged

with his snake's body and the old temple's power – enjoyed the physical torture more than before, and even more so than the magical way.

“Thirty!” he exclaimed. “More than thirty wizards, including the supposedly very best. Against mere schoolchildren, and you managed to lose more than half of your numbers!” he said, before stopping his slithering pacing. “And you don't even know why two whole teams failed to report completely!”

As each time when he was voicing one of his followers' failures, Voldemort's anger grew again, and he slammed his massive tail on the ground, crushing Antonin Dolohov's ankle to a pulp. The man whimpered and tried to take a hold of his damaged limb, but his whole side was raw from the earlier torture and it scraped on the floor, causing more pain and making him pass out.

“Imbeciles! I'm surrounded by imbeciles! And idiots!” Voldemort exclaimed, dejectedly looking at his follower's bloodier appendage.

For a whole minute, the followers waited while the Dark Lord brooded. And they felt each second of it. Just as it seemed that Voldemort was going to begin another rant, the doors toward the library opened and a dishevelled follower entered. He quickly stopped, though, when he remarked the three mounds of flesh in front of his master.

“What is it, Jugson?” asked Voldemort, his umbrageous face expressing that, should what the addressed man say wasn't satisfactory, consequences would be dire.

“My... My Lord... I... that is... we...” he started uneasily, squirming under his master's glare. He then gathered his few scraps of courage – he was a Slytherin, after all, not a Gryffindor – and started again. “Your... link... with Potter... my Lord.”

“What about it?” Voldemort snapped.

Jugson hung his head in subservience. “It seems... that it could... be used... to your advantage... Master.”

That raised the Dark Lord's interest. He slithered down from the dais and approached the trembling man. Not even caring to dismiss the debriefing-like meeting, he led Jugson towards the Library.

Once there, his towering serpentine features dominating the room and the very few book-oriented wizards facing him, he addressed Jugson again. "So?"

And the Death Eater started to explain. As he did, he carefully ignored the fact that the book he had perused centred on soul-mated lovers, centring his explanation on the link established between minds. Except the love thing, the symptoms described by his master resembled those too much for the book to be ignored, but there was no need to tell him about it. The book described the "tunnel between the minds", as well as means to use it and to disable it, temporarily or definitely.

As he had had a month of unconsciousness, a large part of which he spent repairing his mind and verifying its soundness as well, the Dark Lord knew that the link was unusable as such in its present form. However, several ideas Jugson highlighted struck a chord, and he began to chuckle, before laughing outright. The high-pitched maniacal laughter reached every corner of the old building, and it chilled the bones of each of the Death Eaters there.

A few days later...

The ride home was subdued, the students remembering the attack on Hogsmeade and its casualties. Contrarily to what they told Dumbledore, the last two Marauders didn't return home on the train. They had discussed with Harry about the upcoming holidays, and, when the boy had asked them to accompany him in Japan, they had readily agreed.

After having spent the week helping the rebuilding of Hogsmeade, Harry decided to make the trip with his friends. However, he knew that teachers and other Order members would patrol the train, keeping an accurate count of students. That's why he decided to follow the train from the air, soaring through the gaseous reality,

mentally keeping in touch with them and discussing holiday plans as well.

After a couple of hours, though, he became quite bored of merely following a train around a greyish countryside, and took his leave. After all, he had a dirty job to do. He sped up and arrived in London quickly. Once there, it was quite easy to find Knockturn Alley. He took the shrunk body of Kentaro Anderson that was stored in one of his numerous bottles. After enlarging it to its usual size, he transfigured it back to its Death Eater face and body, taking care of changing clothes as well, though he didn't extend the robe sleeves – in order for the Death Eater's mark to show. He took a quick look around – physically as well as magically – to check if there were possible onlookers. Finding none, he merely dropped the body in a seating position in a dark corner. This done, he headed back to the train station, morphing himself on the way.

After a few hours of accelerated trip, the children left the train to meet their families, and Tracey headed towards Harry. The boy had, once again, taken her fake distant relative's appearance. While he hugged her, playing the concerned cousin, he reflected that his memories of his current shape could be removed from his mind. After all, they were in Tracey's already, and Harry's mind was quite full as well: he was already spending several minutes a week deciding of which of his new memories he would keep, which he would store in unbreakable bottles after using his pensieve to retrieve them, or which he would get rid of, permanently.

After promising his other friends to keep in touch, and to organize a get-together later in the summer, Harry left with Tracey, Apparating to Sirius' house as soon as possible.

There, he noticed that the two men were busy packing things in their trunks, and laughed.

“What?” asked Sirius, not even looking up. “It's not that we are going to need our professorship material, so we unpacked them.”

“And Padfoot here thought that, since you invited us in your muggle town, it would be useful to fill the freed space with muggle clothes.” Remus pointed out, closing his trunk and sitting on a chair nearby. “Well, obviously, clothes he thinks as being typical muggle.”

Harry looked at his godfather, who was now storing two bright pink sleeveless tops in the coffer, and chuckled. “Ah, er... Sirius? You should know that this kind of shirt is... special.”

“What about them?” Sirius asked. “I read a muggle leaflet and it showed people dressed with them. No respectable wizard would put them on, so I guess they must be muggle attire.”

“Let me guess... Was that leaflet a fashion magazine?”

The man shrugged, and tried to store leather boots lined with white fur in his already full trunk, much to Tracey’s amusement. Harry, following Remus’ line of reasoning, decided to let him have it, and he’d see his errors quickly enough.

“Alright.” Sirius finally said, slamming the lid of his trunk. It didn’t close completely, though, and the man had to sit on it to secure the latch.

“I don’t know why you stowed your Defence material away.” Harry said, his eyes twinkling. “You could need them to teach me a thing or two.”

The two men looked at him with querying eyes. “What do you mean?” Remus asked.

Harry morphed into Henry Evans before addressing them again. “Who do you think will replace you next year?”

Harry had accepted Dumbledore’s proposal, and the old man had informed him that interviews for the professorships candidates would be held mid-August. Sensing that he had to, even though he knew about it already, Harry had asked why there were more than one chair opened. Dumbledore had sighed before admitting that the

Potion Master had been given the sack, a revelation to which Harry had reacted appropriately.

When he told about it now, though, Harry got three immediate but very different reactions.

Remus was surprised, but his expression faded into a satisfied one. "I told you you'd like it, cub. And I think you will."

Sirius was surprised too, and his shocked look didn't leave his face for a long time. "Prongslet, a teacher?" he gasped. "I had difficulties adjusting to the job already. Merlin saves Hogwarts."

Tracey was surprised as well, but mostly annoyed. "You could have told us!" she exclaimed, crossing her arms. "At least, you could have told me!"

While Harry tried to appease her, Remus looked at Sirius' still shocked stance, chuckling to himself, before he went to the attic to recover a third trunk for the Defence material. If Harry was going to teach, he'd do his damndest to help him. He owed him as much, and more.

When he locked the trunk, all the books safely tucked inside, he noticed that Sirius' shock had receded and that Tracey's indignation had subsided somewhat. "Are we ready?" he asked Harry, who then looked at his watch, shaking his head. "What?"

"Different time zones. I wouldn't want us to arrive in the middle of the night." Harry said, before looking at his teachers expectantly. "Would you agree to share a few memories?"

The two Marauders agreed and gave their friend some chosen memories about teaching and about the course itself. Needing some place in his mind, Harry decided to get rid of several useless memories. The whole persona of Kentaro Anderson disappeared quickly, and the created fake memories of "Jerry" and "Henry" were limited to a bare minimum: he would actively protect his mind in these two cases. Additionally, by using "normal" Occlumency walls, he'd be able to store memories in the space above his mental ground level,

not restricting himself to the already-cramped space below said ground. Once he had finished sorting through everything with the help of a couple aspirin tablets, he thanked them and steered the conversation toward the Order of the Phoenix.

At the beginning, they were quite reluctant to speak about it. However, Harry eased their fear by telling them that Dumbledore had already offered him a position as member of said Order. Understanding this, they gave him a few pointers about the induction. In itself, it was an informal meeting between a group of people and a prospective member. The only difficulty was the truth serum that was used to extract truthful answers from the candidate. Harry frowned. Was it possible to fool a truth serum by hiding memories? When he asked about it, they told him that Dumbledore always asked if the prospective member had some memories stored in a pensieve, thus invalidating Harry's first idea of defence against the serum.

A couple of hours had passed, and the evening was arriving slowly. Harry invited them to eat in a muggle restaurant, and they readily agreed. Of course, to prepare them for the Japanese food, Harry selected a sushi bar, and the two real adults left it a little tipsy from the Japanese alcohol.

As they were walking back home, Harry sensed the two thugs waiting for them in an alleyway, and muttered a Sobering charm – strangely (or not), the 1001st Charm of 1001 Household Charms, a very interesting book resting in Hogwarts Library.

As was his current habit, the charm flew through his right hand, and through the ring-shaped katana on his finger. Unbeknownst to most, Harry had practised most of his household charms with his own ring instead of using his wand. He now had a better control on both the strength and the direction of the spells he used.

Suddenly sober, the two men stopped walking a few steps from the alley and looked at Harry questioningly. The mental words he sent them told them about the imminent confrontation, and they advanced cautiously, wand prepared. When the two ruffians showed themselves, they were promptly dispatched into snoring lumps. Harry

smirked and changed a few memories in their mind, before leaving with the others.

Later that night, two lowly thugs would go to the police station and admit their guilt in several robberies, assault, and actual beating.

Fifteen minutes after having left the sushi bar, the four magic-users arrived at Sirius' house. They then shrunk the trunks and pocketed them, before taking each other's hands. A few minutes later, they all landed in a small apartment.

"Wow, that was quick!" Sirius said.

Harry sent him a lopsided grin. "We're not in Japan, yet."

"What are we waiting for, then?"

"That would be a who, and that would be me." a voice said from behind him. "I think."

"Right." Harry said. "Remus, Sirius, you already know Rupert. Tracey, this is Rupert Perkins, a doctor who helped me after the fire I told you about. And, Rupert, this is Tracey, my best friend."

At Perkins' suddenly suspicious look – and equally suspicious thoughts – Harry reacted by laughing.

"Don't jump to inappropriate conclusions, Rupert. We are both too young for this."

While Tracey blushed, having understood Harry's meaning, the doctor's face changed into a surprised one. "Both too young? What do you mean?"

Harry sighed. "Remember that I'm a kid? Not a grown-up?"

"Oh. Right." said Perkins, blushing. "Sorry. I saw too many cases of... you know..."

“It’s alright, I understand.” Harry answered. “Besides, people tend to get confused about me quite often, and I’m used to it.” he said, before clapping his hands once. “Well, are you ready?”

“What for?” asked Sirius.

“For what I proposed him last week.” Harry said, not exactly answering the question.

“I am.” replied Perkins at the same time, and he pointed to his suitcase. “Do you mind...?”

“Not at all.” Harry answered, before shrinking the thing. The doctor looked at his matchbox-sized luggage in wonder, only breaking from his trance when Harry pocketed it. The man then took the proffered hands of Harry and Remus, the others already in a circle.

A couple of minutes later, the five of them landed in a large living room. “Geneva, Geneva. You are in Geneva.” Harry said in his hands, mimicking a train announcer.

At the same time, a squeal came from the corridor nearby, and Genevieve popped her head through the doorway. Self-consciously, she approached the group, and the two teens noticed that the young woman had changed from her everyday clothes into a beautiful dress.

“You... you are beautiful.” Perkins said, not tearing his eyes off her.

“Thank you.” she answered demurely, before turning to Harry. “Thanks for having brought him here.”

“Yes, thanks for the trip.” the doctor said, not looking anywhere else from Genevieve.

“Do you want me to show you to your room?” she offered, and he nodded, following her. It was almost comical, and Harry refrained from asking about the man’s suitcase. Once the two lovebirds were gone, he fished it from his pockets and restored it to its original size, before dropping it near the doorway.

“Where are we?” asked Remus, looking at the large room appraisingly.

“We’re in my house in Geneva, Switzerland.” Harry said, before launching in a quick account of how he had arrived here. Half an hour later, they were slowly digesting the story, and Harry went to the kitchen to fetch water and some glasses. After filling them and taking a couple of sips himself, he spoke again. “It’s still night time in Japan, and there’s no free room there, as of yet. We can either wait and head there in a few hours, but we’ll be mightily tired, or we crash in for tonight and go there tomorrow morning. Contrarily to Japan, almost all bedrooms here are free – I mean, except the one with Genevieve.”

“-and Rupert.” Tracey added, and they laughed quietly.

They agreed, and each of them took hold of a room. They transfigured several napkins into sleeping bags and they spent the night there.

The next day...

The four travellers ate their breakfast calmly, discussing about the imminent trip and about the previous night – Genevieve and Rupert had been quite vocal, and hadn’t showed for breakfast at all. Harry offered the two Marauders a quick tour of the local magical mall, and they accepted.

The visit passed quickly, and each of them bought a few items – Harry buying another batch of unbreakable bottles with various shapes and adornments. When they Apparated back in the lounge of Harry’s house, they were gruffly greeted by a deep voice.

“Hey, watch your steps!”

Sirius jumped in surprise, and had his wand out and a curse on the lips when he whirled around. His wand was plucked from his fingers, though, and the man there looked at him disapprovingly for a second, before smiling.

“I should say "Get a grip" but I might get cursed for my humour, so I'll abstain.” he said, before offering Sirius his wand back.

“Who are you?” asked Remus. “Are you a...”

“Muggle? Yes. And don't be surprised. Harry and I had several talks, and we agreed that your Secrecy act is protecting you as much as it's protecting us.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that, with weapons capable of killing from miles away, muggles could wipe the planet of wizards if they were presented with a bad image of them.”

“Now, listen here...” Sirius started, but stopped when his wand got plucked from his fingers a second time.

“Be kind, children!” Harry admonished, and Sirius turned toward him, ready to start a childish rant. When he noticed Harry's amused twinkle in his eyes, though, he didn't and angrily took his wand from the still-unknown man.

“My friends, this is Matthew Powell, a good friend of mine. Max, as you could have guessed, these are wizard friends. You know Tracey already, and the two overgrown prats are Remus and Sirius.” Harry said, pointing at them in the correct order.

“The Dog star?” asked Powell, looking at Sirius.

“Himself.” said Sirius, who managed to look appreciative of the comment and still offended from earlier.

“Why did you call him Max?” asked Remus. “I thought his name was Matthew.”

“Right.” said Powell. “I have a nickname, though, and Harry used its shortened version.”

“A nickname of a nickname?” Sirius asked. “Way to go, Prongslet.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Look who’s talking... Prongs-let... really...”

Powell looked between Sirius and Harry. “Do I really have to ask?”

Harry shook his head, smiling. “No.”

“Alright.”

They stayed silent for a few seconds, before Harry went to Powell and caught him in a one-armed hug. “It’s good to see you alive.” he said, and the other one nodded.

“You too, Harry.” he said as they separated.

“Err... guys?” asked Sirius. “Why are you talking like that?”

Harry told them about Powell’s job, and they gawked at the man, who brushed it away as, he said, “something he knew how to do the right way.”

Harry proposed the man a weeklong vacation, and, after greeting the bleary-eyed but happy couple padding downstairs, they left toward Japan.

To be continued in next chapter: A Summer of Disturbances...

The Answers to Reviews gone,
How will it have to be done?
Hope they won’t lose their marbles
For twenty-eight syllables.

Chapter 25 – A Summer of Disturbances

posted December 6th, 2005

Remus and Sirius spent a good time in Japan. In Sirius' case, that meant "except for his first trip outside": the pink tee and furred boots had brought him the attention of a particular kind of people, and Sirius was simply not leaning that way. With Harry and Remus smirking behind him, he had quickly bought clothes in a respectable shop and had then thrown what he had thought as typical muggle clothes in the nearest trashcan.

The two of them also met Petunia Dursley again. Yes, again. They had seen her once or twice, many years before, when the Marauders had been to Lily's home as a group. The three of them shared a few tears over a cup of coffee or three, remembering James and Lily.

On the last day of their week-long stay, they also met with Goken, and the three men had a good laugh when Harry recounted the swordfight his mentor had had with Snape. Remus and Sirius knew that Harry was quite proficient with swords, but they had seldom seen him in action. Harry and Goken obliged, bringing them in the outside courtyard. Once there, Harry morphed his ring back into its usual katana shape and saluted his adversary. Goken saluted back, and the two of them concentrated on bringing their mind in the proper state.

"What are they doing?" Sirius asked Remus. "They don't move."

"Shh." the ex-werewolf answered. "It must be-"

He was interrupted by a double shout, coming from Harry and Goken, and his mouth stayed open, a state Sirius' copied instantly.

The two swordsmen had rushed to each other, and were sparring viciously, the weapons clanking on each other. Numerous times, sparks flew from the clashes. Numerous times, one of them jumped high in the air, either to avoid the other's low sweep or to try a high attack. Numerous times, one of them relied on fists and feet to disentangle from a blade lock. Their speed itself made them hard to

follow, and Remus had the eerie feeling that the two of them were dancing... a fast-paced lethal dance. Sirius didn't think anything, too shocked to react. After twenty minutes of jumping around, sometimes using the surrounding buildings as props, the two swordsmen came to a halt in the middle of the courtyard, a few feet from each other. They were panting hard.

"Not bad." Harry said, and a mischievous glint appeared in his eyes. "Not bad... for an old man."

"Who's an old man?" asked Goken, incensed. He sheathed his sword and concentrated, and, a few seconds later, a bow appeared in his hand. "Defend yourself!" he exclaimed as he was drawing the string.

Harry straightened his hold on his sword, and nodded.

"Wait-" Remus tried to say, but Goken didn't turn around, and released the arrow. Then another. Then several of them at the same time. Then more.

The Marauders' heads swivelled to Harry so fast that they thought they might have cranked their neck. However, instead of seeing a porcupine-looking Harry Potter, they saw a young man concentrating and moving his sword and body to block his mentor's attacks. What was even more daunting was that he was doing so with his eyes closed!

After a couple minutes of doing so, the two martial artists stopped again. Harry opened his eyes and smiled, before noticing the three men's concerned look. He glanced down and noticed that an arrow was protruding from his calf, imbedded halfway through it. Without thinking about it, he grabbed its head and yanked it away, before applying his metamorphmagus powers to heal himself quickly.

When he looked up, he noticed that his two wizard friends hadn't moved. Goken had approached him, though, and was looking at him disdainfully. "Not so perfect, it seems." he stated.

Harry snorted. Now that he knew the man, he knew that it was a play. His eyes caught something, though. "You too, sensei. You too." he said amusedly, pointing at the garb the man was wearing.

While they had been sparring with their swords, Harry had successfully landed a few blows on Goken, and the man had a couple shallow gashes. It was quite harmless, but the blood had been soaked by the man's outfit during the fight, tinting it in a vivid red colour.

Goken shrugged, smiling. "It's nothing, really. It's the first..." he trailed off.

Harry looked at him inquiringly.

"It's the first time you drew blood like that, Harry. I guess that earns you something."

"Something?"

"Yes, something." the man said, now serious. "Be here next Monday at 5pm."

Harry nodded, not understanding what it was about. As his peripheral Legilimency didn't yield anything, Goken being still in the vacant-mind state, Harry had half the mind to fetch the answer by attacking the man's invisible memories, but he refrained. They walked back to the still-gaping Marauders and started making jokes about toads and flies, and the two wizards audibly clamped their mouth shut.

After half an hour of discussion, mostly comprising explanations for the two wizards, Harry, Remus, and Sirius took their leave and Apparated back to the enlarged apartment.

After a quick shower, Harry went to eat with his family, but the phone rang in the middle of the meal. Petunia being the nearest, she answered, and swiftly removed the cordless receiver from her ear when her interlocutor practically yelled something about Hogwarts.

Harry, despite his surprise at having recognized the voice, managed to swallow his large mouthful without choking – intensive sparring meant appropriate diet – while he stood up and gestured to his aunt and adoptive mother to give the offending device to him.

“No need to yell, Ron.” he said, wary of what the pureblood wizarding boy would say through such an insecure means of communication. Remus and Sirius looked at each other and shrugged before helping themselves to the roasted beef again.

“Hi, mate!” Ron answered, still a bit loud. “Nice to hear your voice! Dad brought this fellytone home-”

“Telephone, Ron.” Harry tried to interrupt, rolling his eyes while smiling at his friend’s enthusiasm. “And you’re still loud.”

“-and he succeeded in making it work. Can you imagine?” the redhead continued, ignoring the interruption – unless he used the device in an inappropriate way and didn’t hear it. “Hermione asked the yellow people-”

Harry heard the aforementioned girl yell “Pages!” in the background, but Ron wasn’t done gushing.

“Whatever, she asked for the suffix for Japan and here we are!”

“Great, Ron.” Harry said, while hearing Hermione in the background, complaining about something that vaguely sounded like “prefix”.

“What?” yelled the redhead.

Harry heard a short scuffle, and Hermione’s voice came from the receiver. “Hey, Ha- err... you.”

“Oh, that’s how it’s used!” Ron exclaimed in the background, and Harry smiled at the boy’s inexperience considering anything muggle, imagining him holding the phone in front of him. Or upside down. No wonder he had yelled. Especially if he had thought that he had to yell to reach him halfway around the world. He briefly wondered if the

twins didn't have an effect there, before reverting to the conversation at hand.

"Good evening, Hermione. How's it going?"

She didn't answer for a couple of seconds. "Evening?"

"Sorry. Good midday, then. It's a quarter to eight here. Different time zones, and all."

"Oh. Right. I forgot."

"So?"

"What?"

"How is it going?"

"Pretty well, considering the fact that my family had been invited by the Weasleys for the weekend. Our dads are discussing about muggle things in Mr Weasley's shed while our mums are cooking together. I just have to be wary of- Hey!"

Harry heard another mad scuffle at the other end, mainly comprising laughs despite Hermione's angry shouts. He smiled, understanding through the low-key sound that the twins had pranked her.

Suddenly, a clanking noise was heard in the receiver, and another voice came from it.

"I'm sorry, but Ron is outside with Percy, and Hermione is trying to get the twins to undo their latest prank."

"Ah." Harry replied, not knowing the speaker's identity. A male, obviously. "We will have to wish her luck, then."

A deep chuckle. Definitely a male. "Too true." the voice said, and Harry suddenly had an impression of déjà-vu. Or déjà-heard, more precisely.

The line fell uncomfortably silent for a couple of seconds.

“You want to speak to Ron again?” the voice asked.

“Err... yes, why not.” Harry answered, and he heard the sound of the handset placed on a hard tabletop. For Harry, not having the ability to see the unknown person was quite unnerving, especially as he didn’t have the slightest mental contact. He hadn’t wanted to ask the person’s name either, because then he would have had to say his own, and he didn’t know under what name Ron had called him.

Several seconds later, Ron was back. Harry heard the deep voice instructing Ron about how to hold the receiver. It seemed that the young redhead didn’t remember Hermione using the thing earlier. “Hey, mate! Still there?”

“Hi again, Ron. So... what’s your number?”

“My number? What is it?”

“It’s the number I should dial to reach you.”

“But you don’t need to reach me, mate. We are speaking already.”

Harry sighed. “Alright, alright. Can you get me Hermione? Oh, and... Who was it who brought you here?”

“Oh, that was Bill. My Egyptian curse-breaker of a big brother. I’ll get Hermione.”

Before Harry could react, Ron had dropped the phone... at the place the young redhead thought it best. The cradle. Harry looked at the receiver in disbelief, before shaking his head. Some things would just never change. He stopped smiling when he remembered about Bill and the short interaction he had had with him. The phone rang again, and he pressed the button.

“-and, honestly, Ron, pay attention! I told you-”

It was Hermione. Ranting at Ron. 'Same old, same old.' Harry thought, before deciding to interrupt. "Hi again."

It successfully stopped the girl mid-rant but started a rambling explanation about what the twins – currently barricaded in their bedroom – would look like when she was through with them. Harry tuned it down after a few words, and Hermione stopped quickly afterwards, recognizing his lack of response for what it meant. "Why did I call you, already?" she asked.

Harry chuckled. "Because I wanted Ron's number and he hung up on me."

"Oh, right." she giggled as well, before giving him the number. After catching up on the elapsed week, they wished each other a good summer and repeated that they'd see each other at some later point.

Harry had to explain parts of his phone conversation to his family, making them laugh about Ron's use of the phone. He also had to rehearse his part afterwards.

The next day...

On that sunny Sunday, four persons were standing in the large apartment, taking their leave of Harry's extended family. Well, Harry wasn't taking his leave as such, considering that he was scheduled to come back the same day. Remus, Sirius, and Powell weren't, though, and they thanked the hosts before leaving with Harry.

In Geneva, their first stop, Powell thanked him for the ride, while doing some gesture with his hands. Harry caught it, and he nodded. While Harry sat down, recuperating from the long trip, Rupert and Genevieve entered the kitchen. Judging by the couple's state of hair and disarrayed clothes, the two of them had been quite taken in a last snogging session, and they all smiled.

The muggle doctor told him that the two of them had come to an agreement. Since there was no such equipment as the CERN in England, Genevieve couldn't leave Geneva as of yet. They had

decided together that Rupert would move in. In order to do so officially, though, he had to take the muggle route from England.

After a last kiss and a promise to come back later, Perkins joined the three wizards heading to England and was whisked away. Harry dropped him at his apartment and enlarged his shrunk luggage again, before bringing Sirius and Remus to their home. After checking that no memory was visible from their vacation, he quickly returned to Geneva, as Powell had asked him.

Unbeknownst to everybody, he and his spy friend had taken advantage of living under the same roof for the old man to teach several things to the boy. A couple of these had been discreet means of communication, including the international sign language and several variations. That's how Harry had understood the man's meaning earlier. When he arrived in the Swiss house, the first thing he knew was Genevieve hugging him rather tightly.

"Err... Genevieve? Weren't you just kissing Rupert?" he asked.

"Thank you, Harry." she merely said, and kissed him on the cheek before retreating. "Thank you so much. He's so handsome, and intelligent." A cough interrupted her dreamy tirade and she glared at Powell before looking back at Harry. "Anyways... thank you, Harry."

"You're welcome."

She took her leave, returning to her room to rest. The last few days had been quite tiring, and she needed her sleep to be able to withstand the following week – she would have to work harder to compensate for her absence.

Once they were alone, Harry and Powell headed to the man's room, where Powell extracted a box from a drawer's false bottom. Harry remembered enlarging the drawers for the man, but he hadn't thought that it was, in fact, to dissimulate items using another plank. After all, the plank in place, there was no indication that the drawer contained anything.

“When you told me about stunning opponents rather than killing them, I thought of a few things that could interest you.” he said, and he opened the large metal box.

Harry’s eyes went wide at the collection of weapons. Powell smiled and extracted a few items before slamming the box shut. The boy started, and looked at the weapons that Powell was handing him.

“That is a crossbow.” the spy said. “It is the mix of a bow and a gun, offering a middle ground between the silence of the former and the accuracy and velocity of the latter. This model can also be folded for discreet transport, and it comes with an optional infrared visor. Its ammunition is called bolt, and I have several clips of them here. It’s quite difficult to actually make large clips of bolts, which is why there are only five bolts per clip. Each clip has a colour, too, some of them being the reason why I wanted to show you the weapon.”

He then proceeded in showing the packs, one after the other. “The black ones are normal, pointy ones. There are black ones with indentations on the side, causing the normally silent bolts to scream like a banshee, eventually causing fear. The red ones have a barbed head and hollowed bolt, causing the wounds to bleed even more. The green ones have a dollop of poison inside them, released upon impact. The light green ones will only incapacitate, while the dark green will kill. The cyan ones are the same, with acid instead of poison – very useful to discreetly make holes in containers, trust me. The blue ones are hollowed as well, but they are empty, meaning that you can put anything inside. Another kind of poison, for instance, or even those magical potions you told me about, once. In fact, any substance that can be injected will do. The purple ones will generate a heavy cloud, useful to block visibility. The yellow ones are coated in magnesium, and will light upon impact, allowing you to put fire on things, or simply light dark places if you shoot on something that’s not flammable. There are also orange ones, which are like your pens in that they are filled with explosives, which will be released upon impact. And finally, the grey and white ones. The grey ones are dulled bolts, designed to stun people if you aim correctly. The white ones include a horizontal blade which will spring once the bolt is shot. It’s quite useful to cut ropes efficiently, even from a distance.” Powell

stopped there, looking at the assorted packs. He then glanced at his interlocutor. "Don't worry about not seeing those colours in the dark, though. Each clip also has Braille indentations on them, telling you about their use."

Harry nodded, remembering the memories the man had offered him. The Braille, written code for blind people, had been added to his Language package, allowing him to compress it quickly and easily. The sign language had been included there as well. And the supposedly retired spy's memories about reading on lips were there as well.

He looked at the other weapon, a large and misshaped gun, and pointed at it. "What is this?"

"It's a sawed-off shotgun," the spy replied. "It's absolutely not accurate – except at point blank, obviously – but it has the advantage of shooting hunting ammunition on a large area. The dispersion cone has an angle of 60 degrees. Obviously not for far targets."

"Interesting," Harry commented, grasping the thing and turning it over.

The man looked at him uneasily. "Listen, Harry. I don't really like giving you all these weapons, especially considering your age," he said, raising his hand to prevent a heated interruption. "I know that you're in war, though, and these could make a difference between victory and defeat. Between life and death. Remember what I told you in Japan as well."

Harry nodded, his harsh comment relative to his age forgotten. The man had not only taught him means of discreet communication, he had also given him knowledge of how to efficiently gather intelligence, how to follow someone or to avoid being followed, and how to plan a successful attack on a key point or to defend said key point. Harry knew that it could be useful at any time, and Powell wasn't necessarily going to be at his side when he would need that particular knowledge.

After a dozen minutes, during which Powell gave him memories about how to use these weapons efficiently, Harry left, the new weapons safely tucked away in an appropriately transfigured box which was now shrunk and in his pocket.

A short time later...

Hearing the knock at her room at the Hog's Head, the woman froze, before putting on her smiling mask. Checking in the nearby mirror that the illusion was still in place, she opened the door and took a glance at the old stranger there.

"What do you want?" she asked cautiously.

The man smiled in his moustache and the twinkle in his eyes intensified. It reminded her of Dumbledore, in a different way. What he said, though, sent her train of thoughts through the proverbial window.

"I want an interview." he stated, and his voice dropped to a whisper. "With the real you. I'm Jerry Homest, by the way."

After several seconds of shock, Amelia Bones remembered about the man's articles and their usual truthfulness, and she stepped back, inviting him inside. After a quick look around, she closed the door and threw a couple charms on it.

"A good Silence spell is better than all the damage control one can hope to do." Harry commented, nodding pensively.

She nodded as well, before sitting on one of the chairs beside the small table her room had been furnished with. Harry sat in front of her, and they started to discuss about what they were going to print.

It would be two very satisfied people who would separate, an hour later. Harry would then head directly to the Daily Prophet Headquarters, where he would be shown an article from that morning's edition. An article that would compel him to add a few lines to his one.

That afternoon...

“I can’t believe they would print this!” Hermione huffed.

Ron, after having stuffed himself full, was in no condition to play Quidditch right away, and he had sat in the living room, grabbing the morning’s Daily Prophet edition in the process. He wasn’t such a news addict, but the sport section always interested him – especially Quidditch. He had been halfway through an article about the last defeat from the Chudley Cannons when Hermione, having seen something from her nearby seat, had snatched the paper from his grasp. His annoyed yell didn’t attract her attention, though, and she practically devoured the article that had caught her attention.

Resulting in her previous exclamation.

She threw the paper on the table, where Ron quickly grabbed it again. While the redhead tried to find the Cannons article again, she was pacing nervously. “The nerve!” she exclaimed. “How could anyone write such things without even knowing what they talk about. And they call themselves reporters? Honestly!”

By then, Ron had finished his sports article and turned the page to where Hermione had seen the offending article. And he gasped.

The Deception Around the Boy-Who-Lived
by Dee Zhonest

It has been a long time without an article from the infamous Jerry Homest, and this reporter has sought him around the place without any success. I have come to the conclusion that he doesn’t even exist and that his writings are to be taken with a doubtful mind. After all, how can we be sure that he’s not Albus Dumbledore in disguise?

This reporter finds especially scandalous that some low-level reporter could take advantage of the notoriety of the Boy-Who-Lived by displaying fake interviews. The broken Potter family, whose picture you can see [here](#), doesn’t deserve such a harsh treatment. This reporter also heard that Minister Fudge, in a grand act of generosity, was going to award the Order of Merlin, third class, to Harry Potter,

as well as a reward of 1000 Galleons for having brought the demise of Voldemort, all those years ago. And this reporter is sure that this recent rumour has nothing to do with the fact that the revered Minister, whose picture you can see right next to the Potters, is going down in the opinion polls.

Ron snorted. "I can't believe they would write something like that about- Ow!" he exclaimed, efficiently interrupted by Hermione's kick to his shins. "Why did-" he started, looking up. He stopped short, though, when he noticed his mother and eldest brother looking at him.

"Everything fine, dear?" asked Molly, concerned that her son could be ill from something he ate.

"We've heard shouts." Bill explained, before noticing the two red-faced teenagers and the newspaper. "You two aren't fighting over the Daily Prophet, are you?" he asked, before taking the paper from Ron's hands and casting a cursory glance at the opened page. His next word, though, made the others jump in surprise. Especially the two youngest.

"Harry!"

He was looking at the smiling face of James Potter.
The next day...

The Minister was drinking his Firewhisky-enhanced morning tea with a greasy croissant when the newspaper arrived. As was the case usually, he batted the delivery owl away and it left in a hurry. Fudge never paid for the news. Shoving the remaining half of his food in his mouth, he took a sip from his cup to allow him to swallow it more easily, and he unrolled the paper.

When he saw the headlines, though, he spat his mouthful in shocked surprise, smudging most of the fine-printed article text in the process. He squinted his eyes, but it was to no avail and he quickly stopped trying. He threw it to the fireplace, quickly followed by an incendiary spell, before calling his secretary in. "Bring me the Daily Prophet,

Julia.” he then ordered, acting his pompous self and forgetting that the woman’s given name was Beth.

A few minutes later, the secretary brought the offending paper, and Fudge quickly dismissed her. He was quite sure that the young woman had a smirk on her face when she left his office, and thought about firing her – after sleeping with her over a false promise of advancement, of course. But not now. After carefully swallowing the tea he had just sipped, he opened the offending newspaper again.

The Minister’s Law – sexist?
by Jerry Homest

It has been a month since a very important woman had been fired and slandered in a way that shouldn’t be allowed. She was, and still is, very competent in managing people efficiently, and that is something that should be taken into consideration when one is appointed Head of the Law Enforcement Department.

Yes, this reporter is writing about Amelia Bones. Since her dishonouring discharge, she had lived on the run, her house destroyed by vengeful people and her family mocked. For what? The answer is appalling: for nothing. Because someone else divulged things from an ongoing investigation, the Minister took upon himself to remove her, replacing her by the epitome of the macho wizard. Not even mentioning his brutal ways with women, we still have to see Mr Derrick prove himself competent in the position Fudge had given him – yes, given: Derrick wasn’t elected or chosen by a panel. Did Fudge choose the man because the Minister himself is a sexist? It could be seen that way, especially when one knows Fudge’s ways with women.

Our current Minister should be wary that half of the voting people are women. Intelligent witches who are certainly not going to help him pursue this line of conduct when the elections are to be held, this August. It is also to be noted that, contrarily to what the Minister seems to believe, three-quarters of the voting people are muggleborn. Fudge ought to have thought about that when he purposefully blocked the ongoing investigation about muggleborn murders. And as to why these murders suddenly stopped when Derrick took office, one can only offer the suggestion that the man himself has a link to the

murderers – after all, no Aurors had been dispatched on the cases. Coincidence? Bizarrely, since Derrick's promotion, Aurors seem to be dispatched on Minister's escort more often than actual battles. One can only remember the recent tragedy of Hogsmeade.

In order to defend both sides, this reporter repeatedly asked for an interview from the two men, but they refused each time. This article thus expresses the view of the common wizard and witch, confronted to an administration which ignores them, to the point of belittling when we consider the fairer sex.

Finally, it is to be noted that this reporter has always had memories, testimonies, or proofs for all facts expressed in all of his articles, this one included. It is also to be noted that this reporter exists, and is not a fake construct from people like Albus Dumbledore, as some reporter suggested. People wanting to reach this reporter simply have to send a message to the Daily Prophet – something a particular reporter seems to have missed.

An hour later, just as the man was sweating after having trashed his office in anger, a post office owl came in and he shakily took the proffered missive. While the bird flew out, the Minister squinted his eyes and read the letter. It spurred another round of trashing furniture, before Fudge was too tired to continue. He removed a few splinters from his armchair and sat on it, thinking about what he wanted to do to Jerry Homest when the man would come to interview him. Harry returned to Japan, satisfied of his task. Given the time difference, it was just in time for Goken's appointment and he went there directly.

"Ah, Harry." the man said, seeing him at the door. "Come in, come in. I was just finishing some paperwork."

Harry sat on his knees, and, prodded by Goken, served himself and the man a tea. Quite taken by his martial education last summer, he hadn't learnt the proper ceremony around the tea. However, he had seen Goken doing it more than a couple of times, and it wasn't that difficult to copy the man's gestures. When he finished, he saw his

teacher nodding appreciatively. They both smiled before sipping the hot beverage.

“Sensei, you still haven’t told me about-” Harry started, before being interrupted by the man’s shake of head.

“Harry-kun,” Goken started, smiling, “it’s time you stop calling me that. I’ve taught you all I knew, and the rest will come with experience only. See this paperwork?”

“Yes, sen- err... Goken-sama. What is it?”

“It’s your registration form as teacher for this summer’s kendo classes.”

Harry was shocked beyond words, and the man laughed good-naturedly, something which broke through the boy’s shock. “Uh... Thank you, sensei. Are you sure...?”

Goken frowned at the use of his teaching title from Harry but let it pass. He stood up and patted Harry’s shoulder. “You’ll do fine. Besides, you have to honour your Renshi title with actual teaching, don’t you think?” he asked with a twinkle in his eyes.

Harry was surprised again. “Renshi?” he asked. “But... isn’t that reserved for advanced teachers? I haven’t started teaching yet.”

The man nodded. “Yet you can wear me out in a fight.” he admitted with a smile. “Not everybody can harden their skin to the point of not feeling anything when I score a hit, though.”

“I do feel something!” Harry exclaimed. “It’s just that I don’t bleed from it. I don’t think you scored many times, though. Are you insinuating that I cheated?”

“Not at all.” Goken replied, chuckling. “I know that you landed more blows than I did. I also know that you are in a tight situation right now,

and I find it appropriate that you can strengthen yourself for each fight you might find yourself in.”

Harry nodded, the seriousness of the man’s comment not lost. After a few seconds of reflection, he nodded again. “Alright. I’ll do it.”

“Let’s get clothed and head there, then.” the man said, going to the rack holding the kendo outfits he owned, and motioning Harry to follow him.

Noticing that most of these were for an adult, and knowing that it would be easier to manage a class by being bigger than his 12-year frame, an idea found its way in the boy’s mind and he addressed his former teacher. “Goken?”

“Yes?”

“Have you written my name on these forms yet?”

“Not yet, why?” asked the man, his back to his student as he was pulling the vest over his head.

Harry smirked. He remembered that the man knew about his Metamorphmagus powers – after all, Goken had seen him with different forms already – and he morphed into Henry Evans. “I’d like to change it.” he said, his voice changed.

Goken froze, before turning around. It took him a full minute to take Harry’s new shape in. “Why...?” he asked, before trailing off, not even sure of what he wanted to ask.

“I have been proposed to teach already, next year.” Harry said, and his smile receded into a sad expression. He quickly retold the attack on Hogsmeade and the fact that "his" body had been found dead – he also explained him about the transfiguration he had done to a dead body and said body’s subsequent delivery in the darkest corners of Knockturn alley. “It could be helpful to have papers showing I taught already, with Henry Evans on them – this form’s name.” he concluded.

Goken looked at him, before nodding absently. He resumed clothing himself, his moves mirrored by Harry, and continued his explanation about the job. "Due to one of our teachers' sudden departure for the continent, the Wednesday evening course for the intermediate students would have been cancelled if you hadn't accepted."

"Wednesday?" asked Harry, frowning. "But we're Monday."

"I expect that you'll take advantage of this session to learn the appropriate teacher's decorum." Goken said seriously. "After all, you will be in a position of authority and responsibility."

Harry nodded, and, once they were both ready, he Apparated the two of them in an empty stall of the Nippon Budokan – Goken could have done so, but Harry was able to stop before leaving the gaseous reality, and it helped to avoid people in such a public building.

In the course of the hour, Harry mostly sat on the sidelines, watching the teachers and learning their ways. He also determined the level of the students in each group and the things they had to be taught in each case. His only interruptions were when he was called by Goken to demonstrate a difficult move for the advanced students – not that Goken couldn't demonstrate things by himself, but defence moves required a sparring partner to attack appropriately.

In the end, Harry followed Goken to the registration desk, where the man gave Harry's registration sheet to the officials there. As they were coming from him, the clerks didn't make any comment, just verifying that everything was complete before storing the forms in their satchels.

Harry was going to teach.

When he returned home, Harry saw Tracey trying to catch an excited ball of feathers.

"Wee! I'm arrived! I'm there! See me? I went far! I'm tired, but I'm so excited! Wee!"

Harry looked at the tiny owl in wonder, before remembering that he could hear birds and talk to them. At that particular moment, though, it was more a curse than a blessing, given Pigwidgeon's excitement.

Tracey finally whipped her wand out and magically Summoned the tiny owl to her. It was her Swiss wand, of course: no need to bring the Ministry here – even if Harry doubted they could know what was happening at the other side of the world and under a Fidelius. The girl retrieved the message and noticed two things at the same time: it was for Harry, and Harry was there. She smiled and gave him the envelope before going to the "zoo" room to put the tiny owl in a cage.

Harry sat on a nearby armchair, before opening the letter. He quickly recognized the first of the two sheets inside – it was the article of that Dee Zhonest person, which he had read back at the newspaper's headquarters – and he pulled it aside to read the second. Parsing it quickly, he recognized the two scripts. Ron and Hermione.

Good afternoon, mate,

How are you doing? Here, we're having a blast. I just played Quidditch and Hermione tried to play Keeper for a few minutes. She stopped a throw from Bill, can you imagine? Anyways, she was quickly tired and abandoned the game to read some more.

Speaking of Bill... We just saw this morning's edition of our favourite newspaper, and thought it might interest you. First, for the obvious reasons we won't mention here. And, second, for the fact that Bill said your forename when he saw the picture. Do you think he's remembering? He seemed troubled, but he shrugged it off and joined the pick-up game with me. Did you know that he took a year-long vacation? And that he offered things to our parents? He must make a big income to be able to do that...

Anyways, Hermione is asking for the quill, so I'll let the two of you. Cheers!

As indicated, the uneven script was replaced by a more delicate one.

Hi, err... I should write "mate" too. And, same as before, I don't know when you'll receive this, so I'll settle for "good afternoon" as well.

How are you doing? Stupid me, Ron already asked. Well. I hope everything is going well... wherever you are. Here – at the Burrow – there aren't many books, so I just read my textbooks, you know, to prepare for our homework. Even Ginny is obsessed by Quidditch. I tried to play, but I'm just too insecure to really participate actively, despite that save Ron told you about – I'm sure Bill threw it softly on purpose.

Speaking of him, I think he is remembering about you (Ron told me about it quickly), but he didn't tell us anything. He didn't tell anything either when I asked him the reason for his vacation. He just mumbled something, but, before I could prod him further, the twins showed themselves and the meal took a chaotic aspect from then on. I don't think my parents will ever return here after we leave.

Speaking of them, they are getting ready to leave, so I'm going, too.

Love from,
Hermione

Harry smiled at his friends' antics, before remembering Bill. He was just thinking about including the man in his circle of friends – after all, he had seen him already, and he had been nice – when a feminine body settled on his lap and a hand snatched the letter from his grasp.

“Hey!” he exclaimed indignantly.

“Hey yourself!” Tracey answered mischievously, making a show of reading the letter. “So, what is Ron writing about?”

“How do you know it's him?” he asked, before snatching the letter. “And why did you sit on me?”

She rolled her eyes. “You're in a one-place armchair, mister, and I can't sit beside you, so I chose the next best thing.” she said, smiling innocently. “And as to how I know it's Ron, it's simple: I already

remarked the tennis-ball sized feathery screeching object which would best serve as-

“Alright. I get it, I get it.”

“Well... I saw it in Hogwarts already.” she finished with a pout, as if he had interrupted a favourite game of her.

A pout...

A mischievous girl...

Sitting on his lap...

A beautiful girl...

Harry’s heart started to beat faster as he was noticing Tracey, as if for the first time. Her sandy blond curls were catching rays of the setting sun, giving her head a hypnotizing halo. Her hazel eyes had a twinkling of sort, negating the pouting expression her full lips created.

He unconsciously approached his face from hers, as if to see her smooth skin from nearer. His hand reached up on its own accord, slowly going to her hair to stow a stray strand behind her ear. Surprised at his change of demeanour, she looked at him, her eyes searching his. When his hand didn’t leave the side of her head, she gasped silently, showing her pearly-white teeth.

Despite the faint sound and move, he hadn’t stopped moving forward, and they were now a couple inches apart. Tracey looked at him inquiringly, and Harry was looking back at her, taking in her appearance as if he had never met her before. Their hearts were beating in unison, but their young minds didn’t know why. However, they still knew, intuitively, that they should continue their approach. The two inches gap shortened to one...

“Dinner’s served!” Petunia’s voice called from the kitchen, and the two teens jerked awake.

Harry stood up suddenly, sending Tracey crashing on the floor with a yelp.

“Hey!” she called.

“Sorry.” he said meekly. “I just... reacted.”

Her expression became playful again. “Now? Or before?” she asked, before acquiring a sudden blush.

Harry looked at her with a puzzled expression. When he understood, he blushed as well. Thankfully, he was prevented from answering by the rampaging herd running through the lounge towards the dining room. Harry’s cousins could give this impression when they were hungry and faced to a meal. Any group of kids could, in fact.

The two teenagers looked at each other silently for a few seconds, before Tracey extended her hand. Harry took it and hoisted her on her feet.

“Sorry-” he started, but he was promptly interrupted by her hand on his mouth.

“Don’t be.” she whispered. “It’s not really your fault. Besides, I’m not hurt. Just a little sore, that’s all.”

“Want something to make it feel better?” he asked with a cheeky grin.

She looked at him curiously, and he felt his face heat up suddenly. “Is it a dare, Mr Potter?”

Blushing furiously and not knowing what to answer, Harry would later thank whatever deity watched upon him at that moment, because Petunia peeked through the dining room door and addressed them. “If you want to eat something, children, it’s now.”

They obeyed and took their usual seats, and spent most of the dinner’s duration stealing glances at each other.

However, as the spaghetts were replaced by the dessert, their attention was dragged by Vernon standing up.

“Children.” he started, including Harry and Tracey as well as his own. “I have succeeded in grabbing two weeks of vacation from the bank, starting in a fortnight.” He then took a folder from the nearby counter and gave a couple brochures to each of the persons around the table, Jorg and Ulrike included.

“I initially thought that we could travel around, but I reckon we did that quite a bit before. We can simply visit our new country, for instance. The first prospectus is about a tour of the Japan islands. There’s also another one about destinations in the world, and another one on local attractions. We’ll choose together, what do you think?”

They all agreed wholeheartedly, and, during the remaining duration of the meal, excited chatter could be heard around the table. As Harry and Tracey were there, the dishes were quickly – and magically – cleaned, and they all moved their ideas and their persons to the lounge right after the dinner was finished.

Harry suddenly remembered that he was taken each Wednesday for the kendo course and he told them so. Among the congratulations he received, he noticed his cousins’ crestfallen expression – and “heard” their thoughts about it – and he quickly amended that, thanks to his mean of travelling, he would participate to the holidays nonetheless. At the same time, in Egypt...

Lord Voldemort stretched his 20 feet of scaly serpentine body – when rearing up, he needed a part of it to stabilize himself, and he appeared only 8 feet tall, smaller than his real length – and considered what to do now.

He had just finished a torture session of a group of local muggles, but, despite being refreshing for his soul, they weren’t sufficient as long as the thorn in his side hadn’t been dislodged. The Boy-Who-Lived.

He slithered toward the Library and addressed his chief researcher. "Jugson!"

The man, startled, jumped at least a foot high in his chair, before answering his master. "My... My Lord?"

"What have you found on the mind link?"

The man straightened up and took his notebook. "It seems that what you told us isn't the appropriate method for closing a mind link, master. It crumbles it, but it's possible to re-establish it by digging the rubble. It can take time, though, especially as you wouldn't want anyone in..." he gulped. "Anyone else than yourself in your own mind, master."

"Spare me the details, then." Voldemort replied, nodding his massive and scaly head. "What about the ritual you told me about last time? Is it useable without digging through the link?"

"Yes, master, it seems so. It must be done on a full moon. The problem is that it can't be tried more than once."

"Once... per year?"

"Once and for all, Master. Once for each link one might have. It eventually destroys said link. However, some effects are more destructive to the link than others. It's possible to do a repetition ritual, after a dozen days of rest, providing the sum of the effects' destructive action to the link reaches 100 percent, not more."

Voldemort thought about it. "Tell me about the effects, then." he asked his follower.

"Master, I have to tell you that... some of these include a backlash of similar intensity."

"Like?"

“The killing effect, master, goes both ways. As well as the love effect, but I don’t think you wanted to hear that.” Jugson quickly finished, noticing his master’s snarl. “There is the illness effect, master, inflicting a serious disease to the other person, but it requires a sacrifice of a limb. There’s-”

“Jugson! Tell me only about those which don’t require a sacrifice or are detrimental to my health.”

The man swallowed and turned a couple of pages from his notebook. “The air effect removes air around the target. It can make the target suffocate, but only if he or she-”

“He.”

“Wha- I’m sorry, master?”

“Say “he”. It’s a boy anyways.”

Jugson coughed, before reading his notes again. “Suffocate, but only if he is in an enclosed place at that time.”

“Useless, then.” Voldemort noted, his tail tapping on the floor in annoyance.

Jugson, remembering what had happened to Dolohov’s ankle, tried to find viable suggestions to avoid a similar fate. “There’s the fire effect, master. It puts fire around the target, and there’s no side effect or sacrifice on your side.”

“You spoke about a destructive action for the link?”

“Yes, master. The fire effect has a 10 percent impact on the link. It’s one of the most conservative ones.”

The Dark Lord tapped his chin thoughtfully. “Hmmm... Is it possible to use the same effect repeatedly?”

“Err... no, sorry, master. Unless we can redesign the ritual, but that would involve-”

“Jugson!” Voldemort exclaimed, instantly stopping the rant of his bookworm of a follower.

The man swallowed before continuing his list of effects. “There’s the hate effect, master. For a few minutes, it instils hate in the persons around the target, hate towards the target of course. These people will use whatever means they have to kill him. It depletes the link by 30 percent.”

“An interesting one. Continue.”

“The flood effect provokes a coastal typhoon which-”

“We don’t know where he is. Don’t tell me about location-dependent effects.”

The man swallowed nervously again, and rifled through his notebook. “There’s a pain effect, causing the target a Cruciatus-like pain for several minutes. It takes 20 percent of the link. Another one inflicts boils and disfigures the target, and it costs 40 percent.” Jugson continued to search, and quickly neared the end of his long list. “The last one interesting is the natural disaster effect, master. If the target is at sea, it creates a deadly storm. If not at sea, the effect is an earthquake centred on the target. And, if the target is in the air, it generates a thunderstorm with lightning bolts targeting him.”

“Nothing else?”

“Err... sorry, my lord. I forgot. The last effect reduces the link’s strength by 50 percent.” the trembling follower said. “That’s all, master.”

“You have done very well.” Voldemort said, with the smirk he reserved for his most successful servants. “Continue to do so, and you’ll be rewarded beyond your expectations.”

The powerful hybrid of a wizard and a snake slithered toward the Library's exit, and the Death Eaters working with Jugson started to breathe again. He stopped at the doorway, though, and turned around, frowning.

"Jugson!" he called.

"Yes, my Lord?"

"When do the ritual effects have to be specified?"

The man rifled through his notebook again, and Voldemort restrained himself from punishing him right there for his lack of speed. The Dark Lord knew that no man could know everything and he preferred to have an accurate answer than an immediate but false one. His impatience was only barely contained, though.

Jugson stopped at where the information was and spoke. "They have to be specified during the ritual preparations, my Lord. All of them, since the primary ritual will decide of everything. Should you decide to repeat it, the secondary ones will only trigger the effects."

After a few seconds of thoughtful silence – although his followers found it more foreboding than thoughtful – Voldemort spoke again. "Very well. Since the next full moon is Saturday, we will use that date. I will tell you my choices tomorrow." he said, before leaving the Library. For good, this time.
The following Wednesday...

It was Harry's first official course as a teacher, and he spent most of the morning as a nervous wreck – relatively, of course: his ordered mind helped him with this issue. He was more irritable than usual, but at least, he wasn't annoying the others about it. After lunch, where he succeeded in finishing his plate, he locked himself in his room, mentally reviewing all the possible cases of anything going wrong. When the time came, he Apparated to Goken's dojo.

"Ready?" the man asked with a smirk.

Harry looked at him and shrugged. "As ready as one can be."

"Relax." the man said, while opening the closet in which he stored the kendo outfits he owned. While he extracted the two they had used that Monday, he continued to talk. "You'll see that your goal, in that particular group, consists mainly in making them repeat old sequences together. Only a small part of your time will be devoted to actually teach them new moves. Apart from this, you only have to verify that their postures are correct and to check that the students' skill is appropriate. Incidentally, it's the group where you trained last year, so it shouldn't pose a problem to grasp whether their level is appropriate or not."

When the two of them were finished, they Apparated to the sport hall together, a few minutes before the time. Harry went to where his group was going to be taught, and waited for his students to arrive and finish getting dressed. He idly listed their identities – merely skimming their mind to get their names – and got a shock. Two of them, in fact. Unbeknownst to him, James and Tracey had registered for his group earlier, and they were now there, smirking at him behind their helmets.

'You witch you.' he mentally sent Tracey.

'I thought you would like me here, sempai.' she replied, sending a mental wink as well.

Harry reflected about it. He was still nervous, but Tracey's soothing presence and casual mental comments helped him deal with the situation.

The hour flew by without him recognizing it, and he saluted his students a last time before returning to Goken.

"How was it?" the man asked.

"Interesting." was Harry's answer. "Tiring, too. I never thought that there were so many ways to badly handle a bokken... and so many ways for inattentive students to actually hurt themselves."

Goken acquiesced, smiled. "I noticed. You spent an awful time correcting them. That's good, but do you know the best way for a human being to learn something efficiently?"

"Well... importing memories?" Harry whispered, a smirk on his face.

"I didn't speak about you! I spoke about normal people." Goken replied seriously, but his expression betrayed his amusement.

"What is it?"

"It's trial and error." the man answered. "Let them fail, Harry. Let them have a few bumps and bruises now and then, and you'll see that they will correct themselves quickly."

Harry nodded, and the two of them returned to the dojo to remove the heavy garb, before Harry returned home.
The following Sunday...

That morning, the sun had just risen above the horizon when an ear-piercing scream woke the whole apartment. It wasn't a one-time scream, and couldn't be ignored and attributed to a passing nightmare. Soon, the inhabitants were congregated in a particular room, looking at the source of the scream anxiously.

Harry was screaming and moving haphazardly around, trashing his bed in the process.

Tracey had brought her wand and tried to Petrify him, but he succeeded in breaking the spell and she had to Silence him for them to discuss about it. Vernon and Jorg tried to hold him on his bed, but, after knocking Vernon unconscious and sending Jorg crashing to the wall, Harry continued to trash around in visible pain. Tracey tried to reach out with her mind, but she couldn't bear the pain that was burning his mind as well.

After a full minute of worried reflection, they noticed that Harry's trashing was starting to bring harm to himself: he had already bitten his tongue forcefully and blood was running from his mouth. Tracey decided that she would Petrify him continuously until he'd get better. It appeared the best solution, because Harry stopped damaging himself and his bedroom.

After a few minutes of continuous casting, despite the glasses of water Petunia fetched for her, her throat began to feel raw and she thought about calling Hermione or Ron or anyone else, even the muggle hospitals. She noticed something, though, which made her smile from the bedside chair where she had taken place: the interval between her spells increased. As it meant that Harry wasn't able to shake the immobilizing curse as easily, she supposed that he was going better, and she sent thoughts of affection to him.

It appeared to calm him even better, and he finally stopped moving. She put him on the side, so that he wouldn't suffocate in his own blood – a position she had learnt when in primary school – and, after dispelling the Silencing spell and her last Petrifying spell, she snuggled behind him. Despite the worry about his ragged breath, the magical exhaustion took hold of her and she fell asleep holding him.

When she woke up, the sun was high already and she was feeling light-headed. And her arms were empty. Disconcerted by the unusual room, she blinked a few times and tried to sit up.

“Morn'ng.” an unfamiliar voice whispered nearby and she reacted with a surprised yelp. A throaty yelp, and it made her cough. She felt strong hands helping her, giving her a fuming cup afterwards. “Drink.”

She turned her head and finally recognized the person helping her. Harry.

“Are you alright?” she croaked, taking in his haggard appearance and bloodied tee-shirt.

He merely nodded and pointed to the mug in her hands, and she obediently sipped the concoction. It was very sweet, with a hint of alcohol and lemon.

“Grog.” she said, and he nodded, sipping his own cup.

The two of them spend half an hour in silence, recovering slowly.

“How-” she started, but he interrupted her.

‘Let’s use our minds for a while. I don’t think my voice box is ready for use yet.’

‘What happened, Harry?’ she asked.

Several seconds passed by without an answer and she was ready to repeat the question when he finally answered. ‘I don’t know.’

‘You don’t know?’

‘No. My aunt told me about what I did, but all I can remember is pain. Pain like I never felt before, and like I hope I won’t feel ever again.’

‘But... you told me...’

‘I told you once that I could remove the pain connections in my brain, and it’s true, but this time, it went beyond that.’

‘And you don’t know where it came from?’

‘No.’ he answered, and she distinctively felt the underlying distress. If anything like that was to happen again...

Their mugs finished, Harry removed them before going back to bed, where he fell asleep in her arms.

At the same time, in an old temple...

“Jugson!”

Despite the ritual’s success, the Dark Lord wasn’t exactly happy.

“My lord?”

“How comes the ritual took away a part of my magic?”

“I think it’s because of the scheduled chain of effects, my Lord. The ritual will need your strength for the next steps. The more powerful the effect, the largest the draw.”

Voldemort looked at his quivering servant in distaste, before sending him crashing in the side wall with a sweep of his massive tail. “That’s your last warning, Jugson. You don’t want to fail me again.” he hissed to his barely conscious follower, before turning around and heading to his private chambers. He really was tired, and he would need several days of rest before thinking of doing anything else.
Hogwarts, a week later...

The Order of the Phoenix was holding a reduced session, and the members present were quite disgruntled by the news Moody was retelling.

“Are you sure, Alastor?” asked Dumbledore. “It’s not that we don’t believe you, but it’s quite... harsh. And sudden.”

The addressed man looked Dumbledore and nodded. “Positive. The Minister had personally pushed for this edict to take place immediately.”

“What does it say?” Hestia Jones piped in. “And how is it possible to enforce it the same day it passes?”

“That’s a mystery in itself.” replied the man. “And the decree basically freed the few Death Eaters we caught in Hogsmeade last month, while putting into prison the people who did cast Unforgivables on them.”

“WHAT?” they all yelled, jumping to their feet. A cacophony of refusals ensued, several of them having effectively done the now-unlawful action to bypass the Death Eaters’ protection fields.

“That’s exactly what I thought.” whispered Moody, before quickly reinstating silence in the room. “Why do you think Tonks and Shackbolt got imprisoned? The edict continues in the same direction, making vigilante groups illegal. It even goes as far as granting those Death Eaters a compensation for their imprisonment. In fact, it’s almost as if it was directed specifically against us.”

That started another round of indignant exclamations, mainly targeting the Minister, and Dumbledore stood up. “My friends, this is dire news, indeed, but we have to continue our work. I will try to meet the Minister tomorrow, and we will find a solution. To promote such laws, he must be quite ill-advised, and I intend to make him see the error in his ways.”

That concluded the meeting, and the members slowly filed out.

The Headmaster pinched the bridge of his nose, sighing. He knew he couldn’t afford the additional preoccupation. He already had his school to run, and, between his search for Harry Potter, the threat of Voldemort hanging, and handling the Ministry, if the three of them fought against him at the same time, he would be crushed, more powerful wizard or not.

Shaking his head, he pulled a pad of parchment and his preferred quill, and started to write a few messages, starting a chain of actions he would never have imagined before.

He needed a swift reaction, too, and, before sending the messages with Fawkes, he also transformed each message into a timed portkey – he was still Hogwarts Headmaster, and knew he was legally able to do so; not that it would have bothered him otherwise anyways. While waiting for the addressees to appear, he summoned a house-elf and asked for the diminutive creature to bring him a school owl – at the present time, he didn’t want to send Fawkes to Fudge. The owl

arrived swiftly, and Dumbledore was just finishing his message when a woman appeared in his office. He sent his letter before greeting her, conjuring a comfortable armchair for her to sit.

“Rita. It’s a pleasure to see you here.”

“Dumbledore. To what do I owe this summon?”

The old man looked at her guest appraisingly. “Have you already broken into the Ministry, Rita?”

She smiled self-indulgently. “I have memories of it, yes.” she said, frowning. “Even if I remember why I did it, I can’t understand how I came to do it.” she said, before looking at the old man in puzzlement. “What does that mean?”

Dumbledore could offer several ideas about why the previously greedy reporter was now calm and willing to work for him, but it wasn’t today’s topic. “I don’t know, Rita, but, since you know how to get there, I want you to do something for me.”

“Alright. What is it?”

“It’s dangerous.”

“It’s not a problem, Dumbledore. Shoot.”

“I want you to make two people escape the Ministry cells.”

A pause.

“You weren’t joking when you said it was dangerous.” she said, before strengthening up. “Alright, I’ll do it.”

The two of them settled a plan, which involved a beetle flying in the cells and giving a portkey to Tonks and Kingsley. Five minutes later, Rita Skeeter was gone, and Dumbledore was sipping his tea calmly when someone else appeared in his office.

A boy and his mother.

Draco and Narcissa Malfoy.

Dumbledore swore internally, while displaying his largest smile. "Good evening, Mrs Malfoy, and you too, my boy." he said cheerfully, while surreptitiously activating one of his numerous devices – one that prevented remote control or listening. Now sure that no one else was listening in or controlling the Malfoy, he only had to dispose of Narcissa.

"I would like to discuss Draco's achievements in the last year." he started silkily. "Rarely has a pureblood heir succeeded so much. Here, take a look at this." he said, giving them a parchment. The two of them started reading it, and Dumbledore unobtrusively drew his wand and wordlessly Stunned the woman. Draco hadn't moved, being quite stunned himself by what he was reading. His eyes darted between the text and the signature several times, before looking at his Headmaster, puzzled.

Still silent, Dumbledore brought a pensieve on his desk and gestured to it. The blond boy obeyed, taking the memories and putting them into his mind. After several minutes of adjustment, he looked at the Headmaster with a smirk.

"It's a good thing you did that, Headmaster. My new master wouldn't have taken lightly the fact that you'd taken a hold on me before him."

"Yes, Mr Malfoy, I thought so. What can you tell me about Voldemort, now?"

"He has initiated a ritual, a few days ago, but I don't know what it is about. However, it will last a few days, and he is currently resting."

"What is your position in his ranks?"

"I'm with the young teams. We are still unmarked, but several of them are already willing to kill in order to advance in the Dark Lord's ranks."

Dumbledore nodded absently. A brief look at his clock reminded him of his next guests, and he looked at Malfoy inquiringly. "Did you find anything relative to Severus?"

The boy snorted. "All I know is that the first thing he did, right after leaving the school, was visiting the Goblins. Even before reporting to Vol- our master. And it wasn't even because of his vaults. Nott told me that the man has some sort of a contract with the half-breeds, and he has to see them every summer. Since then, he has been brewing potions non-stop for the Dark Lord. The stocks were quite low, and the ritual required some complicated ones."

Dumbledore nodded again, forgiving Malfoy from using expletives against the Goblins – after all, memories modified or not, the boy was still a Malfoy. The old man was remembering the last few days of school, when he had succeeded in breaching the Potion Master's mental walls and had convinced him that he was still Hogwarts' Potion professor. Since the man had been quite taken since then, he supposed that his little charade was still up. He had to see the Goblins, and was suddenly glad of having thought of taking – and magically preserving – a lock of greasy hair from the man.

After making Malfoy empty his memories again, Dumbledore woke Narcissa and Obliviated the two of them, before holding a meaningless conversation relative to the boy's exams. A couple minutes later, he ushered his guests through the fireplace, just a few seconds before someone else appeared behind him.

Dumbledore smiled, recognizing the presence, and, without turning around, he greeted his last guest in the way he had learnt, so long ago. "Good evening, sir."

"Same to you, Albus, although I must say that it has been a long time since I've been so cavalierly summoned."

Dumbledore turned around and had the grace to blush in shame. "I'm sorry, sir. I have a new problem I can't seem to resolve alone."

“What about your little group?” asked the man – a tall man clad in dark blue robes and wearing a cap of the same colour. “Can’t they help you?”

“It seems the Minister is targeting us, right now. I already have two members in prison and, even if I planned their escape, I can only hope that they haven’t been subjected to Veritaserum already. I wouldn’t like the whole Order arrested.”

“Albus, Albus, Albus...” the man scolded the Headmaster as if he was a mere child. Without him even looking, speaking words, or moving a wand, an elaborated armchair replaced the one Dumbledore had conjured earlier, and the man sat down before addressing his host again. “What did I told you about truth serums and mind shields?”

“I know, sir. I just didn’t want to mess with their minds.” Dumbledore answered, before sitting behind his desk as well.

“Is that so, or do you just enjoy reading them easily? Playing the omniscient and slightly barmy Headmaster?” the man asked. He then brought his hand to his lips, and, during the move, a tea mug appeared in his hand, and the man sipped it.

“I truly made several mistakes, sir, and they are coming back to haunt me. I hid young Harry Potter, I placed Cornelius as Minister, and, even before that, I didn’t care about the life of a poor orphan as much as I should have.”

“And I let you.” the man said. “You chose to live on the spotlight, Albus. I didn’t. Otherwise, I don’t think I’d have lived that long.” He then sighed. “However blatant is your current carelessness about certain things, I suppose I can help you somewhat. What do you need?”

Dumbledore’s first thought was to ask the much-older man about finding Harry Potter, but he had an urgent problem he had to treat first. Besides, he didn’t think he would have reacted favourably to that request. “Elections are going to be held next month, and I think that

Cornelius should step down – I hope he will. His last decrees were particularly unfair towards the muggleborns.”

“...and your point is?”

“Do you know of someone ready to step up? Someone who will not bow to the Death Eaters who are surely misguiding Cornelius at the moment.”

“I might know someone, yes.” the other man answered. “Quite a straight man, too. But I warn you, Albus: he won’t follow your ideas either.”

“Who is he?”

“Rufus Scrimgeour.”

Dumbledore scratched his beard pensively. “I’ve never heard of him.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. Rufus has always been secretive about himself. He’s one of the apprentices I got who resembles me the most in that respect. However, he had fought most of his life against dark wizards in the world, and had learnt their ways and how to protect against them. He simply won’t be swayed by anyone.”

“Will he be alright, politically?” Dumbledore asked. “I mean... there are some times when one has to make compromises...” he trailed off.

“ Judging by your current predicament, I think the time to compromise is over, Albus. You will have a Ministry against you, Albus, or you will have it beside you. It’s just too bad that you let Fudge with enough leeway for him to turn his back on you.”

Dumbledore acquiesced humbly. The scene was almost comical, the rumoured "most powerful wizard in the world" acting meekly in front of anyone. However, given the fact that he was conversing with his mentor, it was the normal politeness expected from an apprentice.

Especially an apprentice of the famous Nicholas Flamel.

The following Monday, in Japan...

Harry's family and friends left the ferry from Hokkaido mainland and set foot in the small island of Okushiri for an afternoon of swimming and sunbathing. The island itself was so small that it was almost completely covered by the town – named Okushiri too.

After a couple of hours frolicking in the waves with the other kids, Tracey noticed that Harry was acting strangely. His face was a little green, as if he was suddenly ill. A mere second later, he fell in the shallow water like a dead body.

Remembering his face from when he had awoken the apartment with his screams, she panicked and hurried toward him, the other kids following her. The four of them managed to bring him to the shore, where the adults were peacefully reading, keeping an eye on the bags – where Tracey's wand was hidden.

Fortunately, Harry wasn't screaming. A mere couple of minutes later, though, he awakened and noticed the worried faces around him.

"What?"

"Harry, you fell unconscious. Are you alright, now?"

The boy checked his body, but nothing seemed to have happened and he nodded absently. Nine days ago, he had had to heal his body and parts of his mind after the pain, but he didn't feel any pain right now. Only a feeling that... something wasn't right.

He stood up suddenly, and looked around, clearly apprehensive.

"What is it?" asked Vernon. The others wanted to ask the same question, but a low rumble came to their ears, intensifying by the second.

Harry had paused, worriedly staring toward the usually flat sea. They followed his westward glance and it took them several seconds to

distinguish the phenomenon. The tsunami was approaching fast, though.

“You don’t think...” started Jorg.

“Everyone, grab your stuff, now!” Harry exclaimed. He had to repeat himself, because of their stunned state. “Quick! And now, take a hold of me!”

It took Harry a couple of frantic seconds to check that nobody was being left behind, and he Apparated everyone out of the way.

The 30-feet high wave crashed on the beach, destroying structures and lives, before continuing to travel inwards, damaging structures and vehicles.

From the gaseous reality, Harry and his extended family watched the greyish scene of destruction with mouth open in shock.

Tracey looked at Harry. ‘Do you think... it’s linked to you?’ she mentally asked.

He looked back, and his eyes acquired a hard glint. ‘I don’t know, but I will find out.’

Seeing his family’s distraught state, Harry decided to bring everybody at the apartment, and he returned to the island afterwards, anonymously helping the inhabitants clean the rubble and heal the critically wounded. Ultimately, the tsunami of that July 12th would make more than 200 victims, and cause the destruction of a large part of the city. Not only directly, but indirectly as well: the gas pipes broken, numerous fires occurred after the tsunami proper.

It took Harry’s family a couple of days before they were able to enjoy their vacation again, and they decided to visit the nearby Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. Harry, however, didn’t want to stay. When he had passed out on the beach, he had had the vague feeling of someone else’s magic acting. Someone he had been "close" to in the past. Voldemort.

Not wanting to put his family at risk, Harry told them that he'd move away for a few weeks. Not wanting to scare them, he didn't tell them about the Dark Lord, though. After vowing to phone them at least twice a day, he Apparated out and left Japan. As he was doing so, despite his sadness at being compelled to leave, he was smiling. Among other possibilities, he had chosen a country he had already visited, although briefly, and where he had wanted to spend some time.

Brazil.

A week later...

Albus Dumbledore considered his options. In doing so, he also mulled over his life.

The old man was considered by many as the "most powerful wizard of his time." And it had been true, should one calculate power like purebloods did, including one's political weight into the equation. After all, after one and a half century living in the magical world, one ought to have met people, and the Headmaster was at the centre of a carefully-elaborated web of acquaintances, each of them owing the great man something.

Thanks to this, Dumbledore had made it so that Fudge was the only one running for the Minister seat, some years ago. He had thought that he could manage the portly man easily, but, with his mounting obsession about Harry Potter, his control had slipped, and his puppet had acquired other masters. Fudge was now shunning him completely, and, short of physically invading the Ministry, Dumbledore couldn't meet the man alone. Fudge had even been advised – by his current Head of Law Enforcement Department – to put his own house under the Fidelius protection charm.

Factually, Dumbledore's principal magical achievement had been Grindewald's demise. Before that, he had learned to be a competent Alchemist, having been apprenticed by Nicholas Flamel himself. Incidentally, a fact that wasn't widely known was that Dumbledore's long life was a result of him taking a few sips of Elixir of Life when he was helping Flamel brewing it, a hundred years ago. His last work

under Flamel's tutelage was his Master Alchemist's thesis, for which he had discovered the 12 uses of dragon blood, something he was widely known for.

At the present moment, though, Dumbledore had other thoughts than his Alchemist's days – even though he had involved his old mentor in his problems. He had finished the after-school paperwork, mainly involving the reviewing, signing, and delivery of OWL and NEWT results, and his obsession flared again.

“Well, Minerva, it had been an interesting year and all, but I have to leave, now.”

“Now?” asked the Deputy Headmistress. The stern woman was sharing the administrative tasks Dumbledore was constantly flooded with, and the after-school paperwork was one of them.

“Yes, now. I'll go to Brazil.”

“Albus, you don't mind...”

“I will go there, Minerva, and I will bring Harry here. With those Death Eaters on the loose, we will need him here. He needs our protection more than anything else.”

McGonagall looked at him inquiringly for a few seconds. She wanted to remind him of the reasons why he had dropped a baby at the front step of number 4, Privet Drive, all those years ago – namely: giving him a proper childhood. She didn't speak up, though, and turned around, her shoulders slumped. “As you wish, Albus.” she said, before leaving the office.

The old man looked at the door for a moment. For half a second, he thought of staying, of recalling her, of forgetting Harry Potter and all his intrigues. She had shared numerous years leading Hogwarts with him, and he didn't like the disappointment he had witnessed in her eyes.

But he didn't move, and the instant passed with the office door closing.

Brazil, four days later...

Harry strode the street towards the hotel guarding the magical mall. He had started renting a room there when he had arrived in Rio de Janeiro, using a false identity and a morphed face – looking Brazilian, of course. Nothing had happened to him yet, and, despite his numerous phone calls to his family, he was starting to feel the strain of having parted from them. He had seen them twice, on Wednesdays, when he had come to Japan to teach kendo. These visits were short, though: he still had an ominous feeling, and knew he could only wait for the other shoe to drop.

After several evenings sifting through his own mind to build his new defences, he had realized that the collapsed remains of the tunnel leading to Voldemort had almost disappeared. But not completely. He didn't know how to vanish it, though, and resolved to wait, hoping that nothing disastrous would happen.

In the meantime, though, he explored the town a bit, and started to learn the sport called Capoeira, a sport which some called dance, while others sorted it as a martial art. He was quickly remarked as a talented student and invited to nightly contests – where the fighting aspect took more importance than dance or game. During these fights, only his enhanced agility saved him from several harsh defeats – against people more knowledgeable in that particular fighting style, he simply couldn't win all the time.

He was just coming back from such an errand and entering the hotel, when he noticed a faint Legilimency brush against his mind. He couldn't determine where it came from, though, and started to panic: as his mind now had strong defences instead of a fake display, he knew that whoever was browsing his mind would notice the discrepancy between his young frame and his defences. He cursed internally and turned around to exit the hotel.

“Harry?” someone called, and he almost froze. He knew that voice, and, looking at where it came from, he realized that its owner must be

magically concealed. Using only a hand, he quickly tested the gaseous reality, and its solidity confirming his hunch about the anti-Apparation field. Harry broke into a run, determined to avoid Dumbledore.

“Harry! Wait!”

The boy didn't stop. He had an ominous feeling about this. However, he suddenly realized that the ominous feeling didn't come from the old wizard. Not at all. He suddenly stopped, panting heavily, and fell on all fours, earning him curious gazes from nearby policemen. A hateful feeling began to take hold of him before rolling off of him in waves. Harry couldn't do much, and, when he saw the policemen grab their firearms and take aim, he took the easy way out. He Apparated out.

Dumbledore rounded the corner, cursing his idea of putting an anti-Apparation field in the first place. What he saw, however, made him gasp. Several policemen were aiming their bullet-throwing weapons at the boy he had thought of as Harry. He barely had time to react as the men didn't even speak before pulling the trigger. A cacophony of gunfire came from the place, and Dumbledore barely noticed the boy disappearing from where he was.

The gunshots didn't touch Harry. But there had been people behind him. Poor people, mostly children, who didn't have much choice for a place to sleep. People who, most of them being asleep, hadn't felt the powerful hate wave centred on Harry. They had had the misfortune of choosing to spend the night near the Candelaria church, and eight of them died on the spot, in what would be later called the Candelaria massacre.

Dumbledore was still hidden, and his first thought about Harry's disappearance was oriented towards accidental magic. While it was rarer when people reached 11, it was still possible, especially in such a stressful situation: there had been several cases of threatened teenagers accidentally Apparating out of harm's way.

The old man surreptitiously threw a couple of spells to detect Harry's Apparation destination – such spells allowed a wizard to grasp a global direction and distance from the Apparation starting point. He

looked at his wand in wonder, though, when the spell didn't yield any result. It was as if the young wizard had Apparated, without moving. As the boy wasn't there physically anymore, Dumbledore concluded that the boy mustn't have been Apparating, and concluded on a portkey use, something he knew was much more difficult to make, and equally difficult to trace.

What he didn't know, however, was that Harry had effectively Apparated, and that the detection spell had been successful: Harry was still there. The boy was lying in the gaseous reality, though, unconscious from the magical exhaustion caused by Voldemort's ritual.

Dumbledore returned to the hotel, reflecting about his earlier intuition which had told him to wait for Harry there. After all, if Harry used the magical mall's post office toucans, he had to travel there at one point or another. And his relatives were muggles, so they would have been out of place living in the magical place itself. Reflecting about the Dursleys, Dumbledore remembered his last failure in reaching them. He had asked the muggleborn hotel receptionists if there were ways to obtain their address, and, after consulting a large book, the man had told him the address of two Dursley households in and around Rio. Dumbledore had gone there, of course, but none of them were the ones he sought. He had then established himself in the hotel lobby and, knowing that Harry could change his face, he had tried Legilimency on any male teenager. When he had found the boy with the surprisingly strong defences, he had had an inkling that it had been him, but the boy had disappeared. Again.

When he entered the hotel again, the elderly wizard went to the reception desk again and read the employee's minds surreptitiously, trying to see if they had interesting memories about the elusive boy. Surprisingly enough, it appeared that Harry was actually living in the hotel itself. Dumbledore headed to the boy's room and Apparated inside as discreetly as possible. He quickly noticed that the room was empty, and he relaxed enough to search the room for clues. There weren't many of them, as Harry, when not at home, always kept his most prized possessions on himself, in his locket. The only things left in the room were everyday clothes, and a couple letters.

Despite feeling intrusive, the old man browsed the letters and remarked that one of them was Harry's answer to the other, which was from Susan Bones. Susan's letter told about her aunt's interview, and about how she wished he could return to Hogwarts next year. Harry's answer – signed Harold – only told her that he was happy for her aunt, that he wasn't scheduled to return to England anytime soon, and that he will be out of the country for the summer term. Inspecting the bin, Dumbledore found a draft of Harry's answer and read it as well. To his surprise, it was almost exactly the same content.

‘Why did he discard this one?’ he asked himself, before looking at both letters attentively. There was only one sentence which differed. The final version read "Greet your aunt for me" while the discarded one read "Greet Amelia for me." He frowned. What could it possibly mean? How could Harry know Amelia Bones by her given name? Still in deep thoughts, he pocketed the draft before jinxing the clothes with several tracking charms, not noticing that there came in several sizes. He then donned an invisibility cloak and sat in a corner of the room, one that was overlooking the room's door. After a few minutes of waiting, he also threw a specialized anti-Apparation field, one that allowed entry but forbade departure. Several minutes later...

Harry awoke and looked around groggily. With a start, he recognized the grey tinge of the gaseous reality and the memories of what had happened earlier crashed back in his head. He also noticed the agitation around him, people running left and right, and complaining in Portuguese. Apparently, Voldemort's spellwork – he was now sure it was him – had caused quite the unrest.

Still in the gaseous reality, he slowly returned to his hotel room, with the aim of sleeping his exhaustion away. After all, he had participated in a late session of Capoeira before the magical event, his sweaty shirt being a clear indication of his involvement. Consequently, his first stop was the bathroom, where he Apparated and took a long and hot shower. As the water was splashing on his strong body, soothing his tired muscles, he checked his link with Voldemort, and noticed that it was completely gone. Where there had been an entrance clogged with rubble before, nothing remained. Whistling happily,

Harry finished his shower and, using the towel to vigorously wipe his hair, he exited the bathroom.

He would never know that, but his state of undress – he was naked – was what saved him from abduction, that day. In the seconds Dumbledore took to react, Harry had noticed that something wasn't right in the room and had immediately scanned his surroundings. He spotted Dumbledore's aura at once and immediately disappeared. Just as Harry was finally noticing the anti-Apparation field, the red and large beam of a powerful Stunning charm passed through his now invisible and intangible shape.

Dumbledore threw the cloak to the side and looked curiously at the place where Harry was. He had seldom heard of people disappearing without a particular item on themselves, either a portkey or their wand – to Apparate. The only reason he could think of was that the boy had an item of jewellery imbued with a portkey, the activation of which included safety reasons – like someone attacking him: in the old man's eye, that was coherent with Harry's last disappearance.

The boy gone, the old Headmaster wasn't going to waste time waiting an unknown amount of time for a return he thought of as unlikely, now. After a last Legilimency sweep, he grabbed the dropped cloak and lifted his anti-Apparation field before Apparating out.

Harry saw the old man entering the gaseous reality and speeding towards an unknown destination, and he breathed a sigh of relief. He could, now. Even if he didn't have to breathe while being in the gaseous reality, it was still disturbing to be bodily held like that. He had also felt the mental sweep, and had quickly hidden his mind, using the no-mind technique – the one concealing one's mind, not his version of burying everything, which was not only longer but also close to impossible, now, since most of his subterranean space was taken.

Even though Dumbledore was gone, Harry remembered that the old man wasn't the only magical aura he had felt in his earlier scan. He repeated it, only to find that his clothes had been magicked somewhat. Not knowing which spell had been used, he decided to cancel everything in one go – after all, none of his normal clothes

were inherently magical, so he had no qualm in removing all the charms. He fished Merlin's wand out of his locket and, after a quickly uttered "Finite Incantatem", there was no spell remaining and he could dress without a second thought.

He then stowed all his clothes in one of his pockets – which inside he temporarily enlarged for this – and grabbed his mail. Remembering something, he checked the bin and, noticing the missing draft, he groaned. 'There was really no need to drop clues.' he thought. 'Especially to him.'

With his senses fully open to detect any hostile – or plainly nosy – presence, he went to the hotel lobby and checked out. Using the Visa card his uncle had given him earlier, he paid the indicated sum, idly reflecting that the telephone calls to Japan were what did cost him the most.

This done, he entered the elevator again and Apparated to Switzerland. After sleeping soundly for a few hours, he went to Gringotts' local branch and moved a part of his money to his Visa account. This done, he left towards Japan, where he was fully intending to make good use of the remaining vacation time he had, mostly by spending as much quality time as possible with his family and closest friends.

A week later...

Dumbledore sneered at the goblin in front of him. It wasn't a grimace the Headmaster was accustomed to, and he was tired of showing the world the face – and greasy hair – of Severus Snape. A few snappy remarks and an extremely focused Confusion charm on his wand had fooled the goblin teller, and he had been led to a side room where a pensieve was brought to him.

He scowled at the goblin guarding the door, making the creature tremble in fear. The goblin didn't move, though, and Dumbledore mentally shrugged. After all, a pensieve could be used discreetly. One after the other, he brought the memories to his head, inspecting them as he went.

When he finished, he knew that his job was only halfway done: the pensieve only contained Snape's will, and the actual memories were in another pensieve which was stored in the man's vault. Dumbledore had impersonated the man, but not his identity, and he knew he couldn't enter the vault.

As fifty minutes had flown by already, Dumbledore decided to leave the place quickly, and he did so, doing his best to make his robes billow behind him as he went.

Two weeks later...

After the Obon festival, Harry and Tracey returned to England, having decided to establish themselves in the house the girl owned in Newcastle. They managed to get an employee of the phone company on their first day there, and the house was quickly hooked to the phone network again. The rest of the day was spent cleaning the house from its unused state.

The next day, Harry went to Hogwarts for the teaching positions interviews.

While he was travelling through space, he reflected about the last three weeks. James had shown him several interesting things related to computers, and Jorg had demonstrated how to use a foldable antenna to link a portable computer to the brand new communication satellite. It wasn't as efficient as the 56K phone lines, but it could be used from almost anywhere in a very large area, even without access to technology. Harry had immediately seen the possible use of this: is he could find a way for a computer to work in Hogwarts' halls, and for magic to power it, he would be able to contact his computerized alter ego while in Hogwarts. Thinking of Copycat brought memories of the conversations he had had with him, thanks to Jorg's office computers, and a smile appeared on Harry's face at the recollection of his double's commercial ventures. Harry had also discovered the possibilities of information Copycat had: right after having barely mentioned a few things he hadn't had a clue about, most of them muggle, his double had offered him an explanation on each of them. Much faster than Hermione.

His thoughts followed, and he remembered the phone calls he had had with the Ravenclaw girl. The two of them had discussed about the possibilities of lying under a truth serum, and Harry had made a quick dash to the Swiss magical mall – of the three he knew, it was the closest and best furnished – and had bought a couple vials of each truth serum. With Tracey, they had tested each of them, and Harry had discovered that most of them failed against his particular brand of Occlumency. Only the Veritaserum passed through a mind's defences, but even then, it didn't go under the mind's surface, and his underground memories were safe. He had then passed a long time reordering his memories, pushing the inconsequential ones above the "ground" while burying the most secret ones in the depths of his mind.

He put a damper on his reverie when he reached Hogsmeade, and left the gaseous reality at the Apparation point. After pausing to enjoy the morning sun for several seconds, he headed toward the nearby castle and his first official job in England.

As he had envisioned, Dumbledore made him drink a truth serum, although a mild one, and he repeated his fake résumé to a panel made of the Headmaster and his Heads of House – minus Slytherin's, which was still unaffected after Remus' had resigned. When they requested a course summary, he presented a variant of the one done by Remus and Sirius, to which he added fencing classes and duelling. At that moment, he noticed the look Dumbledore and McGonagall shared, and his peripheral Legilimency made him realize something: his weekly schedule was certainly already full, and he wouldn't have time to organize all these activities.

"I don't know about Hogwarts' current curriculum, though," he added smoothly. "If these activities are already managed by the staff, there's no problem."

"Not at all." Dumbledore intervened. "It is true that you will not be able to manage all seven years and these peripheral activities, but I'm glad you proposed your help, and I'm ready to lend you an item that would help you in that regard. You see, we are in need of willing teachers, especially in Defence Against the Dark Arts. It seems that the previous teachers weren't able to stay for more than a year."

“If you are satisfied with my work, sir, I hope I’ll last more than that.” Harry told him respectfully, before turning curious. “What is the item you spoke about?”

Dumbledore opened one of his numerous and magically-enhanced drawers, and extracted a chain with a small pendant hanging on it. A pendant in the form of a silver hourglass. “This... this is a Time Turner. The school has a special permit from the Ministry, so that we can let teachers borrow it for the duration of the school year. Despite our current disagreements with the politicians, this hasn’t been rescinded yet. If you can swear that you’ll use it only for testing purposes when out of Hogwarts, I’ll let you have it now.”

Harry straightened up. Magical oaths were something else he had experimented thanks to Hermione’s ideas, and he was able to use his fake reserve of magic as target when he swore that way, thus not endangering his real magic when he broke an oath on it. He was losing a bit of magic, then, but it was quickly recovered, and the mental silo was quickly rebuilt as well. “I, Henry Evans, swear on my magic that I’ll only use this Time Turner for testing purposes when out of Hogwarts.”

When the wave of magic generated by the oath subsided, Dumbledore smiled and gave him the timepiece. Harry then had to sign the form recording him possessing the Time Turner, and the triplicate recruitment documents too. Dumbledore thanked him, and, as Harry had been the last one to pass, the Heads of House left to inform the other two candidates that the job had been taken.

Harry was looking at the hourglass in wonder. So many possibilities...

“Satisfied?” asked Dumbledore.

Harry looked up and noticed the infamous twinkle in the old man’s eyes. “Very much, sir. And I gather you are, too. I was just wondering how the Time Turner worked.”

“The hourglass is mounted on a pivot. To return one hour back in time, you only have to turn it once. You can go as far as 24 hours, but I wouldn’t advise for it.”

“Why so?”

“Are you familiar with the laws of time travel, Mr Evans?” the Headmaster asked, his expression serious.

“Well... no, sir. Until today, I didn’t know such an item existed.”

“They are simple, really. The gist of them is that you cannot change past events. It can provoke a paradox. And time-travel-induced paradoxes are automatically resolved by the space-time continuum in the most painful manner.”

“What do you mean? What’s a paradox?”

“Imagine you go back in time, and you kill your parents before your birth. You wouldn’t be born, right? If you don’t exist, there would be nobody to go back in time to kill your parents. If your parents live, you are conceived and born...”

“I get it, I get it.” Harry said, before bringing his hands to his head. “I feel like an aspirin would be good, right now.”

“A what?” asked Dumbledore.

“Aspirin. A muggle headache reliever.”

The old man chuckled. “True. We can lose ourselves in such discussions. The paradox is solved automatically, though. Several wizards have tried to defy the laws of time already, you know, most of them wanting to prove a point.”

“What happened?”

“The moment they made the gesture that would cause the paradox, they died, and their remains found themselves scattered over time itself.”

Harry didn't answer, trying to imagine the scene. He stopped quickly, though. “Alright. I'll be careful. Although... could I involuntarily do something like that?” he asked.

“The timeline tries to resist the change.” answered Dumbledore. “If you try to change the past drastically, there will be a resistance. Besides, I gave you the Time Turner only for you to be in two places at the same time, which is the most "safe" usage that can be made of it.” the man said, before pausing for a few thoughtful seconds. “I guess you will try it later, but there's an advice I can give you right away.”

“Yes?” Harry asked.

“It is all about sleep: if you go back in time, say, eight hours to repeat the whole day, you will obviously be much more tired the second time around. What I recommend is to go back far enough to grab time to sleep. There are two main possibilities, there. You can either repeat a whole day, by going back as far as 24 hours, but it raises the possibilities for paradoxes – the further you go, the greater the risk – or you can repeat each period. In the latter case, you'll have to repeat time a few times during the day, in order to include a resting moment when you are tired.”

Harry nodded and considered his options. After several seconds, the Headmaster conjured a tea set, and proposed some to his interlocutor, who accepted. They sipped the hot beverage in silent reflection before Dumbledore addressed "Henry" again.

“I just thought of the two situations where you helped us fighting dark wizards.” he said. “Since you know of the existence of the Order of the Phoenix, I'd like to propose you an official membership.”

“Well, that's interesting. I'm honoured.”

“Do you think that you could join us?”

Harry thought about it, and, not finding any reason not to, he acquiesced wordlessly.

“Great!” Dumbledore exclaimed, smiling. “There is a meeting tonight at nine, right in this office. If you agree, we will present your induction then.”

“I’m alright with it, Headmaster.”

“If we are going to live in the same castle for at least a year, you can call me Albus.” the old man said, before leaning forward. “At least, when there are no students around.” he finished with a smirk, his eyes twinkling madly.

“Alright, Albus. I guess you can call me Henry, then.” Harry answered, and the two men finished their tea in companionable silence. Dumbledore then called for a house-elf to guide Harry toward his quarters.

When he exited Hogwarts, a dozen minutes later, Harry was quite happy. He walked to the limit of the anti-Apparation wards and left Scotland, heading to the southeast, towards Newcastle and Tracey.

During the short trip, his thoughts went, once again, to the previous weeks. Ten days earlier, after receiving fractional information from Copycat – something the entity had been sorry about, but Harry knew that information wasn’t always available in a numeric format – he had gone to Mexico, had entered the National Library, and had unearthed anything he could find about Nahuals. He had then read about the protective spirits and shape-shifters they were, and, from what Remus had told him, he had identified his own Nahual as Quetzalcoatl, a feathered serpent. Despite having been quite wary about it since then, he still hadn’t received a sudden visit of the feathered serpent in the midst of the night. Since then, he had put that bit of information on the side of his mind and had enjoyed his holidays.

When he arrived, he found a giddy Tracey speaking to the phone and guessed it was Hermione at the other end. The girls quickly finished speaking, and Tracey retold him the discussion.

Apparently, the Weasley had gone to visit their French cousins, and they had all decided to spend a week in Venice – the French had a proverb which meant "see Naples and die" except it was Venice instead. Ron had hinted that, if a few friends could be invited, they would perhaps have a free lodging not that far away from Venice. Mrs Weasley had accepted, and Ron had contacted Hermione, who in turn had just told Tracey when the latter called her to test the phone.

Harry laughed at the far-fetched scenario, before thinking about the proposal. Actually, he wasn't against renting a whole hotel floor in Venice itself, rather than constraining the kids to follow the adults in what was still cross-country Apparation jumps – through the Alps Mountains, no less.

Tracey called Hermione again, and, as Harry had told her he was busy that evening, she told the Ravenclaw that they'd pick her up the next day.

After a quiet afternoon spent in town, Harry left Tracey and headed back to Hogwarts. He entered the Headmaster's office a couple minutes before nine, and noticed that the Order of the Phoenix was already there, its members hidden behind concealing charms. While greeting everybody with the shyness one could expect from a new recruit, he reflected that the old man had certainly discussed his induction with them already. And he was correct.

"Good evening, Mr Evans." Dumbledore said, motioning him to a chintz armchair in the middle of the room. "I already submitted the request for your induction to the Order, and you were accepted through a favourable vote. Now, if you will, I'll give you a few drops of Veritaserum to prove your loyalties. Do not worry; we have always done so to prove our new members' loyalty. You can refuse, but if you opt to leave now, I will have to Oblivate you."

While Harry was nodding, taking place on the seat that had been prepared for him, he couldn't prevent a disturbing thought from

reaching his mind: what if Dumbledore's potion was stronger than the ones he had tested himself against?

His fears were put at ease, though, when he answered Dumbledore's first question:

"What's your full name?"

"Henry Liam Evans."

The rest of the questions were quite simple afterwards. Harry had invented himself a childhood and education in America, a house in Liverpool, as well as a string of jobs involving attacking and defending against dark wizards and dark creatures, or teaching.

The questioning done, Harry was recognized as a full member of the Order of the Phoenix, and he was given the appropriate ring: a gold band with a phoenix embossed on the outside. Harry put it on his left hand, from which he had removed Ravenclaw's ring earlier that day – he had initially been wary of removing his spellcasting focus, but he now had enough control over his katana-turned-ring to deal with standard spells. And he still had Flamel's wand in a wrist holster, for those cases where appearance was important.

With the ring, Harry also received a parchment listing its numerous properties – Dumbledore didn't want such tedious repetitions to clutter meetings, and he was issuing the parchment to each new member. While the other members removed their concealment charms, Harry went to a seat that had appeared for him in the U-shaped arrangement of chairs, and quickly parsed the document.

First of all, the ring was keyed to the blood of the first wearer, and was inactive when leaving said wearer's hand, or if the wearer died. The ring also acted as a limited communication device, which allowed quick sending and receiving of requests for assistance or meetings. Those who got the call also received the location of the sender, so as to Apparate as quickly as possible.

The ring was also charmed to be invisible and unnoticeable, except for the other people wearing one. Fortunately, thanks to the ring being keyed to the first wearer's blood, stealing one couldn't expose the whole order.

Hearing people talk around him, Harry looked up at people there. He already knew most of them, but played the surprised one, when he noticed that they were there. Several of them were quite haggard, though, as if they were living on the run. He already knew about Amelia Bones, but he noticed that Tonks and the black man beside her were, too. Tuning out the reports about some spying action in Wales, he focused on Tonks' mind to get the reason behind her dragged state, and gasped mentally when he found that the young Metamorphmagus Auror had been wrongfully imprisoned and badly treated. The black man, whom he now knew as Kingsley Shacklebolt, had had the same treatment – the sexist comments being replaced by others about his skin colour – and was now sharing her room at the Hog's Head.

Harry noticed Sirius and Remus as well and mentally greeted them, before asking why Tonks wasn't living in Grimmauld place with Remus. Seeing their querying gaze, he understood that they didn't know about her runaway state. Visibly, Dumbledore wasn't having full meetings all the time, and the information about Tonks' captivity and ensuing escape hadn't reached them.

Since, as a new member, he wasn't supposed to know things like Sirius' address, he kept his mouth shut, only mentally nudging a suddenly blushing Remus to offer her a room in the Fidelius-hidden house at Grimmauld Place.

When the meeting ended, Harry smiled when he noticed a pink-faced Remus approach Tonks. He grinned even more when she readily accepted, blushing herself. Harry let the members leave slowly, discussing together about common interests before taking the Floo home. As he was a new member, it was only common politeness to let the others take the Floo before him. And it left him with a suddenly interesting occupation: watching the Headmaster.

Dumbledore was currently thinking about his visit to Gringotts and Snape's vault, wondering about how to illegally enter the man's vault, and inadvertently displaying these thoughts for any master Legilimens to read. After all, with Snape gone – Dumbledore had remotely deactivated the ex-double agent's ring –, there was no such master in the Order, right...?

As he was taking the Floo to the Leaky Cauldron, Harry smiled. He had decided to help the old man once more. He couldn't do it openly, though, and he was ready to give Jerry some work.
At the same time...

Mentally thanking the Time Turner, Jerry Homest exited Gringotts with the appropriate memories safely stored in his Unbreakable bottles. As he was descending the marble steps, he reflected on his recent actions.

After entering the Goblin bank as Severus Snape, body and mind, he had subjected himself to the Goblin form of Legilimency to get a duplicate of his vault key. Once done, he had discreetly checked that his current action wasn't going to be reported to the real Severus Snape anytime soon, before taking the chariot ride to said vault. After entering, he had spent an hour digging through the man's possessions for the pensieve, and sorting through the memories to remove the ones incriminating the Headmaster. And the ones incriminating other people too, while he was at it.

Once at the Apparation point, he Apparated to Hogwarts and waited behind the door for his "younger self" to leave the Headmaster's office, while morphing into Jerry Homest. Once he was sure that he wouldn't meet himself, he Apparated in and pushed the door.

"Good evening, Headmaster." he said to the surprised man.

"Good evening, Jerry."

"I have something that could interest you." Harry directly said, taking the bottle containing the swirling mist from his pocket.

“What is it?”

“I couldn’t help but notice your little stunt, two weeks ago.” he started, basing his reflection on the memories the old man had unconsciously broadcasted earlier. “Highly illegal, by the way. Thanks to several connections – which legality are as doubtful –, I managed to obtain what you sought.”

“Is this...” Dumbledore trailed off, unable to finish, looking at the bottle with round eyes.

Harry smirked. “Yes.”

Seconds appeared to last longer as a tensed pause settled between the two immobile men.

Dumbledore was the first to break it. He shook himself awake and addressed Jerry. “I don’t suppose you’ll give it to me?”

“I’m perfectly willing to give it to you.” Another pause. “But I want something in return.”

The Headmaster looked at him inquiringly. “What is it?”

“A truthful answer to two questions.”

“Answers, again...” Dumbledore said, before sighing, looking at the memory. After a couple of thoughtful seconds, he frowned. “How can I be sure that you aren’t going to fool me? This could be a copy, or there might be copies of it anywhere. In your mind, too. And you’d be able to blackmail me afterwards.”

Harry sighed. This was going nowhere. “Are there means to identify copies from originals?”

“Yes.” Dumbledore answered guardedly.

“Are copies useable as proof in the justice system?”

“Well... no, since they have the same tinge as modified memories.”

“So, get a pensieve out, now, and we’ll find out if my bargain offer is valid.”

The old man obliged, and got the stone basin out. Wordlessly, Harry emptied the memory inside, and Dumbledore erected a small privacy screen to check the memory and its authenticity. Once done, he looked at Harry with wide eyes. “How... how did you...”

“It’s no bother, now. Are you willing to give me the answers I sought?”

“I guess it depends on the question, but go ahead.”

“You know I am in contact with Harry Potter, and I told him about our last conversation. He also told me about your last attempt at kidnapping him, and he had those two questions which I want the answers to: how he is supposed to be protected from Voldemort while at the Dursleys, and why you are stalking him like that.”

Dumbledore stared at the man in front of him, thinking hard. Was he trustful? He tried to read the man’s peripheral thoughts, but found none. To his surprise, the man smirked, as if he had detected his attempt. Refocusing on the questions, he thought he might as well tell something, even if it wasn’t the whole truth. He took a deep breath, preparing the answer.

“Harry’s mother, Lily, has sacrificed herself for her son. In doing so, she gave him a protection against Voldemort. A protection based on blood, which shielded him against the Dark Lord’s most powerful curse. By staying at least a month a year with his aunt, his aunt’s house will benefit from the same kind of protection the whole year.”

Harry looked at the man in wonder. Was it all? “You are telling me that a mother sacrificed herself for her son and that this sacrifice blocked a Killing curse? How about all these mothers around the world, whose such sacrifice didn’t ensure their progeny’s life?”

“Well, since you know that there’s a prophecy made about Harry, you’ll understand that this part I cannot answer. And that’s also the answer to your second question. Harry will be instrumental in this war against Voldemort, and I intend to train him as much as possible for the Light to win.”

“Train him, you say?”

“Yes.”

“Under your tutelage?”

“Of course.”

“Why? I mean... what are you going to teach him?”

Dumbledore stood up and quickly stored the pensieve away. “I’m sorry.” he said curtly. “This isn’t a part of your original bargain.”

“What would you do if he presents himself to you? Try to stun him again? Don’t you find him sufficiently able to protect himself?”

The Headmaster had a sudden epiphany. This man, who seemed to know Harry so much... It was evident, now...

“You!” he exclaimed.

A pause.

“Me?” asked Harry, not a little worried at the man’s sudden look of understanding, but hiding it well in the depths of his mind.

“You trained him?”

It took Harry most of his willpower not to breathe a sigh of relief. “Perhaps.” he simply said.

“What does he know?”

“Am I required to answer this question? As you said earlier: "This isn't a part of your original bargain." Since you seem so wary of answering me, despite my gesture of good will, I don't think I have anything to do here anymore.”

With this, Harry stood and turned toward the exit, his senses in full alert. He noticed the old man standing as well. As he was taking his last step towards the door, he noticed him taking his wand out. As he extended his arm towards the handle, he noticed the curse heading his way...

He disappeared.

Dumbledore looked at the empty space and, in frustration, he threw several anti-Apparation charms on his office. The old man stayed up late that night: using a complicated ritual, he tied the wards he had just created to a magically-altered diamond, which would now act as anchor for the spells. His job done, he looked at the new trinket with satisfaction, before remembering that Jerry could already Apparate through Hogwarts' permanent anti-Apparation field. His own spells, in comparison...

The old man went to bed, but, despite the late hour, he didn't find sleep until even later.

The next day...

Harry had spent a troubled night, his dreams involving Voldemort's evilness and Dumbledore's manipulations, and he woke up as grumpy as a prodded porcupine. Tracey sensed that he wasn't his usual self, and she left him simmer for a couple of hours before getting fed up. Thanks to her better link to Harry's mind, she had already understood the reason behind his current mood, and she tried to use it to her advantage.

“What do you prefer, Harry?” she asked suddenly, planting herself in front of him, her fists to her sides. It grabbed his attention, but she didn't allow him to start speaking. “You'd rather stay in that grumpy

mood all day? Or, do you prefer spend the day unwinding with your friends? With me?" she added the last part as an afterthought, but it helped her case immensely. Especially as she changed her stance from defiant to puppy-eyed just as he was watching her.

Harry didn't know what to do. On one side, there was his ongoing strife with the Headmaster, and he wanted to find a way to end that without putting himself under the man's thumb. On the other side...

On the other side, he was scheduled to spend a year teaching, so his Harry Potter persona was going to be hidden already. He looked at Tracey with a hesitant smile. "Alright," he said, and extended his hand for her to pull him upright. When she took it, though, he pulled hard, and she fell beside him on the couch.

"What the...?"

"Tickle war!" he exclaimed, and started to tickle her madly. The "war" finished less than five minutes later, with the two of them sprawled on the rug in front of the couch. They were lying face-to-face, Tracey on top of Harry, and their four hands were being held under his body.

Tracey suddenly realized how close they were, and how muscled his body was. She suddenly recalled several specific memories: how he had always been there for her; how they had been so close lately... Looking at him in surprise, she wondered when he had changed from a brotherly friend to... something more?

She gasped, and, blushing, she disentangled herself quickly and stood up. He followed suit, standing and blushing as well. Both of them were unsure of what to do, and Harry spoke first.

"We'd better get going," he said, before turning around. His voice was different, and she shivered, her whole spine tingling. It was deeper and held an undertone which she couldn't grasp yet, but which promised much in the future.

“Ri-ight.” she whispered, and she noticed that her voice was different as well. And it made him stopping mid-stride, her voice affecting him as much as his was affecting her.

A couple of seconds later, both of them shook themselves awake, and the moment passed.

They got themselves ready, and Harry gave a couple phone calls to reserve a set of adjacent rooms at the hotel Danieli, using his credit card. He knew that the hotel would cost him quite a bit of money and decided to make a stop at Gringotts to withdraw enough muggle cash for the stay. With Tracey still holding his hand, he then Apparated to Hermione’s place, where they paused just enough time to grab her and to salute the parents before leaving towards Italy.

Once in the hotel lobby, Harry checked in, and the three of them discovered the expensive rooms facing the bay with all the gondolas parked nearby. Harry left the girls at their discoveries and he went to Brittany to fetch the Weasleys, changing his appearance in the way. He used his mind to reach Ron, and noticed that they were all in the garden, visibly waiting for him – as they had been instructed earlier. He also noticed that they were laughing about something and he mentally queried Ron to know what it was.

‘Hi, mate. It’s just Percy who’s acting like an ass.’

‘What did he do?’

‘He brought his girlfriend Penelope over, and he’s now drooling over that other girl, and Penelope isn’t that happy about it.’

‘It’s not funny.’

‘It was a dare, initially. The twins learnt that the other girl is a part-Veela, and they dared her to show her power.’

‘Part-Veela?’

‘Yes, it’s these girls who have a power to woo boys. I think her name’s Flower, but I’m not quite sure. She’s cousin Amaury’s girlfriend. Anyways, the twins said they would resist, but they are now perfectly impersonating lapdogs, it’s hilarious. And poor Percy, who’s barely resisting.’

‘Alright. Well, anyways... the girls are waiting. I’m coming in.’

Ron had barely time to warn his family before Harry Apparated in the middle of their circle, and he immediately felt the power coming from the blond girl. It wasn’t anything else, though: he just felt the power originating from her, trying to ensnare his mind, but failing – for obvious reasons.

They jumped at his arrival, though, and the girl stopped her display, allowing the boys to recuperate their fallen jaws and wipe their mouth. She looked strangely at Ron and Harry, though, as they had both resisted her power quite well. Ron had been quite far from her from the start, being on the other side of the circle made by the large family. Harry, however, had Apparated nearer, and he had visibly felt her power, but hadn’t reacted as men usually did.

Said "man" raised his hands to calm the surprised adults, who seemed ready to curse him. “Don’t shoot! I’m Harvey Jefferson, your host and transport today. And I’m also pleased to meet you.”

The part-Veela reacted first, and approached him. She went very close, and kissed him on the cheeks. “Fleur Delacour.” she said, before returning to her place.

Blushing, Harry distractedly brought his hand to his face, shocked that a girl could kiss him like that without even knowing him. However, he sensed Fleur’s thoughts and understood that she was genuinely curious about him, and also that kissing each other on the cheek was a common French custom – except between straight and unrelated males. Fleur’s curiousness disturbed him, though, because she was quite close of noticing a discrepancy between his resistance to her powers and his apparent ingenuity concerning girls – apparently, only mated males could resist a Veela.

He retook control of his body and his blush receded. He greeted everybody, and was introduced to the Prewett families. After the round of introduction, he told them that the transportation was going to be made through a special kind of portkey. After producing a transfigured length of rope, everybody put a finger on it and he Apparated the sixteen persons in the largest suite of the Venetian hotel. Ignoring the curious glances about the portkey's unusual smoothness, he left Tracey and Hermione to take care of them and stumbled to his room to take a short nap.

The next days went like a blur. A mostly red-haired blur. The group visited the sights and enjoyed the relaxation in the high-end hotel. Two days before they were scheduled to leave, though, Harry's senses picked something unusual.

Well... it wasn't that unusual, especially given the fact that he was surrounded by magical people most of the day. It was just another one, a witch, and she was just walking briskly through St Mark's piazza, not even interested in them as she was scolding her young son in Italian.

As he wanted to see if there were places wizards could visit, Harry decided to follow the woman and he warned Tracey about it before disappearing. After copying the woman's olive complexion and raven hair, he reappeared behind a corner and walked around it, missing her by a fraction of an inch.

"Oh! I'm sorry, Madam." he said in Italian. "I haven't seen you there."

"It's nothing." she replied absently, before trying to sidestep him.

"Wait, please!" he exclaimed. His Legilimency had picked her will to leave, as well as something akin to... fear? "What is it you run from?"

She stopped and stared at him, seeming to assess him. As she opened her mouth to answer, Harry caught one of her thoughts and

had the presence of mind to interrupt her. "I'm a wizard too." he whispered, leaning forward.

She looked around, apparently afraid of something, before dragging him towards an alcove nearby. "Are you mad?" she demanded in a whisper, oblivious to her son's surprised expression at her vehemence. "Do you want to be found out, walking in the outside like that?"

It was Harry's turn to be puzzled. "What do you mean? I'm not from here... I'm just a tourist. Speaking of which, is there a place that wizards and witches could visit?"

Her appraising look returned full force and she nodded suddenly. "Follow me." she merely stated before turning around and walking away rapidly. To Harry's surprise, she walked in a brightly lit ice-cream parlour, through which she went to reach the stairs to the upper levels. They passed the parlour's second floor and stepped over a red and white plastic chain before she opened a door, entering a storage room.

That's what it seemed, though.

Harry had caught the last of her thoughts before she went through the doorway and he paused briefly. It seemed that she wanted to trap him, but he was curious about her. Something about her face and demeanour wasn't quite right, and he wanted to know more about it. He reasoned that her aura hadn't felt particularly powerful, and he quickly used his ring to cast a shielding spell on himself, the kind of those which absorbed enemies' spells discreetly. He then took a last step through the illusionary doorway.

To be continued in next chapter: The Masquerade and the Apocalypse...

Getting arms and meeting friends,
Printing the truth and teaching...
It's a busy summer-thing
Which mysteriously ends.

PART 4 – Everything Goes Down the Drain

This part covers chapters 26 to 36 and concerns Harry's third year at Hogwarts.

Chapter 26 – The Masquerade and the Apocalypse posted December 31st, 2005

The moment Harry passed the door, he felt the pull of a magical portal – he knew about them from Sirius' house – and found himself outside again. It was a bit strange, because the door had been on the ice cream parlour's second floor and he was now on the pavement of a small alley. Several persons were standing in a half-circle around him, and, before he could even speak, four quick incantations resounded in the alley and four red beams shot towards him.

By hearing the thoughts around him, Harry knew that it was a mere Stunning spell, and he played the surprised tourist by not moving out of the way. He was genuinely surprised, though, but he decided to take advantage of the situation. Despite the fact that he was still conscious, he let himself fall to the floor. Not only would it look normal, but he would be able to see what their reactions would be, and he also wanted to study their odd appearance.

All of them wore flowing robes and elaborate masks, even the woman and her son. Harry briefly reflected about the suddenness of the change, and, elaborating on the thoughts broadcasted around him, he guessed that it was because of some kind of magic linked to the doorway. As he didn't have a mask himself, he suspected that the charmed portal brought back the others' true appearance, instead of creating these masks on the fly. So... these were their usual clothes? Harry realized that not displaying them allowed them to hide while in the muggle part of the town. A masking charm on a mask...? It was already mind-boggling.

The woman gave the little boy – who was presumably her son – to someone who seemed indubitably male, despite the hiding garments. On top of remarking that the man's stature was one of authority, Harry noticed that his mask bore many resemblances with the boy's. So much, in fact, that he realized that it must be the boy's father. The woman then approached him, smirking – the mask followed her

mocking expression, as if it was moulded on her face... unless it was her face. "A tourist, huh?" she asked. "More a spy from the doge, I say. Your master's predecessors tried already, you know. We will not relinquish our only time out as ourselves. It's only a week a year, for Marcus' sake! Obliviate!"

After casting the spell, she turned around and started to discuss with the others. Apparently, they were annoyed that the little boy had gone that far in the muggle city despite whatever protections against it. Harry, not in the least affected by the memory spell, judged he had heard enough and stood up.

"Now, that was not very nice." he said, brushing his sleeves.

The other wizards tried to Stun him again, but his shield held true and he smiled. "Is that how you welcome foreign wizards?" he asked.

One of them, a witch, approached him from the side, and Harry could only marvel at their craft in making those elaborated masks and robes. If he wasn't an accomplished Legilimens, he would have been hard-pressed to guess her gender.

"Is it true? You aren't a spy of the doge?"

Harry bowed. "I'm not, Madam." he said, and that earned a gasp from the others. "I swear I don't have any ill intentions toward you... I don't even know what the doge is! Is it the muggle town's council?"

"Mug...le?" she asked.

Harry hadn't been able to translate the term in Italian, and he elaborated. "Non-magical people."

"Well..." the woman started, but she was interrupted by another one.

A severe-looking mask came in Harry's sight, and its owner spoke curtly. "Sort of."

It brought an uneasy pause, and Harry was acutely reminded of Snape in his best days. Even the man's mind seemed to follow the Potion Master's structure, as Harry's peripheral Legilimency didn't yield any useful information.

The silence was broken by the woman he had encountered outside. "Since you swore to our faces, the magic had certified you were trustworthy," she said, and Harry instinctively knew that it was true, despite the fact that she was hiding something. She then exchanged a brief glance with... her husband? They seemed to reach a quick decision, and she addressed him again. "If you can swear not to reveal anything of what you'll find here to anyone, I will lead you for a visit."

Harry looked genuinely surprised. Why was there so much secrecy around it? Shrugging the feeling to the side, he promised as such, and they all looked satisfied. The man with the stern mask and the genderless-clad woman nodded, the deference apparent in the gesture. They then stepped back to stand guard near the entrance, leaving Harry with the little family.

"This place isn't quite appropriate to conduct meetings," the father said, and Harry jumped at the deep and commanding voice. "And we wouldn't want the scene to repeat at every corner. Before you follow us, can you hide your face and body?"

Harry nodded wordlessly and transfigured his outfit in a flowing cloak with a hood, which he drew up. They looked at him for a few silent seconds before leaving, Harry following them through the streets of what he thought as magical Venice.

It was an eerie place, as each and every person there had robes and a mask. Harry briefly wondered about the temperature – after all, it was summer and the heavy robes ought to be uncomfortable – but he quickly reasoned that their garment was certainly charmed to stay cool whatever the weather was.

While he followed his hosts, he quickly realized that he was looked at as an intruder, and people started to whisper behind his back. Recognizing this, the woman led him to a small maze of alleyways

through which the foursome hurried until they passed a particular door.

“Phew.” the woman breathed, slightly panting. Since the Venetians seemed used to their heavy garments, Harry supposed that it was because of walking that fast with her son in her arms – especially after having done so in Muggle Venice.

“What was this about?” asked Harry. “Why did you hurry?”

“You see,” the woman began, “the clothes you... created... are those we give to people in prison. Or rather, the whole robe-without-mask outfit is. We didn’t think about it, and some people started to talk about you.”

“I saw the masks, and I was wondering... what is it about?”

The couple threw an uncertain glance to each other, until they seemed to reach an unsaid conclusion. The woman grabbed the little boy’s hand and dragged him out of the entrance hall, and the man led Harry to a beautiful room, which seemed to act as a study and lounge at the same time.

The richly decorated room had a corner with two oaken bookcases and a sturdy desk, while the rest of the space was occupied by leather couches. Several paintings hung on the walls, and Harry’s attention was dragged to one of them, a sombre one, where two men were standing in front of a huge gate. In the picture, the doorway was half-open, and an ominous reddish light was pouring out of it, highlighting the outline of several misshaped creatures inside. The boy didn’t know what the painting was showing, and he approached to decipher the text that was painted atop the gate.

Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate.

"Abandon all hope, you who enter here." Harry translated. Despite knowing Italian since his first stay in Rome, Old Italian was a bit more difficult. While he was wondering what it was about, he heard the

man walking behind him, and he turned around to see the man's mask looking at the painting as well.

“Dante and Virgil about to pass the Gate of Hell.” the man commented. “The famous necromancer visited the realms of the dead and came back with a tale. However, the non-magical government of that time didn't realize the impact of the manuscript, and only shortened and unusable versions subsist to this day. This, and artistic works.” he finished, his arm encompassing the walls of the room, where other paintings rested. He then went behind the desk and sat on the leather armchair, before motioning towards the two high-backed chairs on the other side.

“Please, sit. Tea?”

Harry did so. “Yes, thank you, sir...?”

The man didn't answer and, while he was serving the amber liquid, his expression looked uneasy. “I'd rather we don't address each other by names, yet. It's already uncomfortable enough for us to have seen your face.”

“I'm sorry about it. I just didn't know. Is that why you have masks?”

“Well... yes, and no. But I'm not ready to speak about this either.”

“What do you want to talk about, then?” asked Harry, clearly disappointed

The man stood up briskly and went to a window, on Harry's right, to look at the harbour beyond. “Since you didn't seem to know about the Doge, you are perhaps wondering what we are at all.”

Harry nodded silently, and, strangely, the man seemed to notice the movement, even with his back to him.

“To understand, I will have to give you a bit of History first. Our city, Venice, has been established during what the non-magical people

call the 6th century. We don't count like that, however: our years are aligned on the city's founding. We are now in year 1425, by the way.

“In year 132, the city changed its ruling body, and the large tribunes were replaced by a leader, chosen among the most powerful and charismatic men of the city, and elected for life. It was a successful arrangement until year 1229, when Napoleon's troops invaded the country, and the last purely Venetian doge abdicated, giving his power to the French emperor. Since then, and until recently, the office of the doge had been taken, quite informally, by several rulers of Austria and Italy.

“You have to understand that the title of Doge of Venice is a very powerful one in itself: on top of the Duchy of Venice, it also implies ruling over the Duchies of Dalmatia and Istria, something which has made Venice the naval power it was. For instance, it was Venetian boats which allowed the crusade of 636 to take place... but I digress.

“The ruling of the magical part of the town is something else entirely. When invaded by the French army, we made sure to separate completely from the non-magical parts of the town, and started using masks daily to hide our features. Masks were part of our folklore from year 594, but they became survival tools since the invasion. And, since then, we have never departed them, even magically ensuring that we would have them on ourselves all the time. Specialized spells are cast upon each newborn to provide him with a permanent mask, which will grow and adapt with the child's evolution.

“In 1362, when the Italian president forbade the use of masks, we shut our community completely and lived in autarchy until 1411.”

The man paused, seemingly in deep thoughts, and he took a sip from his now-cold teacup. Harry had listened raptly, his History of Magic lessons had never told him about a magical community in Venice – then again, Binns' main topic seemed to be the Goblin wars. He had gasped when the man had told him about the permanent masks, and had made the appropriate computations in his head to get the events' proper dates.

“What happened in 1979... I mean, in 1411?” he asked.

“A group of wizards came to us.” the man said, turning around. “They forced their way into our wards, and started to spout nonsense about pureblood ethics and things we didn’t have a clue about – especially as they talked English all along and few of us could understand the language. Seeing that they didn’t achieve their propaganda, they went away, but not without much destruction in their wake. The magical explosion killed ten of our people, injured dozens, and damaged the submersed structures which hold the city upright. Judging that it was time to meet the outside world, a delegation tried to retrieve the current doge to get his protection, but they stumbled on a sizeable obstacle.”

The man stopped there, his pensive expression becoming annoyed. He took another sip of tea before continuing. “Through Marcus-knows-what machinations, the powers that had allied themselves during World War two passed the Doge position to the British government, and it is now linked to the position you might know as British Minister of Magic.”

Harry expelled the breath he hadn’t known he had been holding. “Fudge.” he whispered.

“Yes, Fudge.” the man answered absently. “Since then, we have tried to get the position back in Venice itself, since it allowed the Doge a better control over the city, both magical and non-magical. We have even started patrolling the non-magical city in our normal garb – masks and everything – to display our willingness of managing our city locally. But the man has always rejected our envoys, and, politically, we are in a dead end.”

He then looked at him. “Would you help us, Harry Potter?”
At the same moment, somewhere else...

“And, to Harry Potter, I have decided to award ten thousands Galleons and the Order of Merlin, third class, for having disposed of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.” Cornelius Fudge said pompously, and

smiled when he noticed the effect his words had on the crowd of reporters.

The man on the other side of the podium looked at him coldly, though. “When I am elected, I will fine you for embezzlement on this issue.” he said. “There is no need to reward Mr Potter now instead of 12 years ago, and everybody knows that the boy has yet to be found – another proof of your inability, really. Since he is unreachable, the Ministry policy is for the Minister to keep the money. A policy you passed recently, by the way. Admit it, Fudge: you were just giving yourself a small allowance.”

Fudge glared at his opponent, remembering what was at stake today.

It was the last couple of days before the Minister election, and, as was customary, the final contenders had to subject themselves to a free-for-all debate in front of a room full of journalists. Low blows were the norm rather than the exception then, and the tawny-haired man in front of him had served him more than what he was able to stomach. That, and the two old men who were sitting behind Scrimgeour, showing their support. Dumbledore and Flamel, really! Fudge had thought that the alchemist had been a sham, and he had refused the living legend from accessing the room. However, it had backfired spectacularly when Dumbledore had sworn on his magic that it really was Nicholas Flamel. When Fudge had asked the old Headmaster to cast a spell to prove that his oath hadn’t stripped him of all magic, the man had given him donkey ears for thirty seconds – not enough to justify formal charges, but enough to ridicule him.

Fudge concentrated back on the debate. If he wanted to survive – politically and literally – he had to find an angle of attack. It wasn’t something he was used to, though, as the previous elections had been quite peaceful. At that time, Fudge had benefited from Dumbledore’s support from the start, and the portly man hadn’t had to use the underhanded methods he was now known for.

In this instance, though, with the help of his advisors, the current Minister had done so, and three out of the four other contenders had folded like in a bad poker game.

Regarding Scrimgeour, however, his advisors had been hard-pressed to find anything against him. They had invented false truths and forged documents related to them, but the man had sworn them off in each case. With magic, honesty was a deadly weapon in these duels, and it wasn't a weapon Fudge knew how to handle, nor how to deflect.

Browsing his data while smiling sweetly at his challenger, Fudge remembered something that he hadn't used yet. Pointing at Scrimgeour, he addressed the assembled reporters. "This man can't run for Minister!" he harangued. "He is perpetrating an illegal deed, even as we speak."

Scrimgeour sighed, and several journalists frowned at their current Minister in annoyance. It wasn't the first time the portly man had used empty arguments and threats. "What is it, now?" asked Scrimgeour.

Fudge looked at him with a smug expression. "You are an illegal Animagus!"

Scrimgeour sighed again, fishing a parchment from the stack in front of him. When it appeared that he wasn't answering immediately, Fudge turned to the crowd and opened his mouth to continue, but his tawny-haired challenger interrupted him. "You should update your data, Fudge."

"What? I'm..."

"I am a legal Animagus."

Fudge stuttered at the form Scrimgeour was holding. A form for Animagus registration, dated a few days ago. Another one of his attacks thwarted. Unless...

"It's a dangerous creature!" he exclaimed, wanting to play the crowd.

"Stop spouting nonsense, Fudge. You should know that Animaguses have nothing to do with werecreatures. We keep our human mind while in the animal shape."

“But... a lion!”

Scrimgeour frowned at him, anger lighting his yellowish eyes, and, for a brief moment, the persons around him had the feeling that he was actually a dangerous creature, ready to jump at Fudge’s throat.

The man calmed quickly, though. “Even if I don’t want to know who you bribed to have this information, I will only repeat what I told you: whether an Animagus transforms into an ant or an elephant, they keep their human mind, and are not considered dangerous creature.”

Fudge opened and closed his mouth a few times, visibly struggling for words. “A lion?” he asked weakly.

“Yes, a lion!” Scrimgeour answered, and his previous anger made a fleeting comeback. “Now, do you have some other meaningless attack you wish to conduct on my being?”

Fudge lowered his eyes and consulted his folder again. “Your... your familiar is an Augurey?”

Scrimgeour rolled his eyes at the man’s incompetence. “Yes. And, before you start of the rubbish about Augureys being dark creatures, know that recent studies proved that they are not.”

“They are not?” the current Minister asked. “Aren’t they messengers of d-”

“No, they are not.” his challenger said, smirking. “Their cries predict rain, not death. As you can see, nothing related to the Dark Arts. Unless you wish to state that rain is a Dark Arts manifestation?”

The crowd sniggered at this, and Fudge blushed before lunging at his folder, desperate to find the smallest thing he could against the man.

They continued to spar for a couple hours, and Cornelius Fudge walked back to his office with a scowl, dismissing his low-level advisors on his way. Where was Derrick when he needed him? His most trusted advisor had disappeared right before the debate, and

that had undermined the Minister's confidence. Scrimgeour had had Dumbledore and Flamel's support, while he only has his undersecretary, Dolores Umbridge. To try to compensate, he had drafted Arthur Weasley into it, but the man had been clearly reluctant.

Now, Fudge wanted to pass some last-minute decrees, and he needed Derrick badly: as any Department Head could countersign his decrees for immediate application in the Department's field, the man had often helped him during these last few months. Running the Ministry had started to be a very enjoyable job. And very lucrative, too.

Somehow, Fudge felt that it wasn't a job he was going to keep for long.

As he was entering his office, this feeling intensified when he noticed the two men sitting on the chairs on the visitor side of his desk. Earlier, in Venice...

Harry looked at the masked man, stunned speechless.

The man looked back at him and smirked. "You are powerful, Mr Potter, and, unlike the one who brought pain and suffering in here, your goals are honourable, even though you can be ruthless. I feel your surprise, though."

"How?"

"How what? Unlike you, I'm not able to read minds, so you will have to be more precise."

That shocked Harry even more. Who was that man? Was he going to be a threat? He weighed his options, reflexively clenching his fists.

The man noticed, and his mask suddenly acquired an apprehensive expression. "Don't anger yourself, please. Don't be afraid, either. Your secret is safe with me."

"Who are you?" asked Harry.

“Ah, introductions.” the man nodded. “After all, I know your name, and you don’t know mine. You may call me Leonardo. And, in case you wonder, it’s not my name.”

“Then... why?”

“Because, like with the masks, no one here knows the name of anyone else – except oneself and one’s parents, of course. To satisfy your interest, I’ll just say that we have two sets of names. One is private and one is public.”

It seemed to be consistent with the masquerade, and Harry nodded. “You will understand, then,” he started, “that I’d rather not be called by my name.”

“I understand, and I offer my apologies.” the man said, and Harry could swear that the mask blushed a bit. “I needed to get your attention, though. Now that it is done, we can use another name for when you stay here.”

Harry acquiesced thoughtfully, trying to find yet another name to build a persona upon.

Seeing the frowning expression, Leonardo spoke up again. “If I may give you an advice, I’d suggest Odysseus.”

“Err... alright. Why?”

“It is the Greek name of the legendary man you might know as Ulysses. Like him, you have travelled many years. The name itself has hidden meanings, too: "man of wrath" according to the poet; in the Greek language, it can be translated as "the guide"; and it can also mean "the one inflicting and receiving pain" – in the sense that you’d receive pain as much as you’d inflict it. I feel that this last meaning is significant for you, especially regarding the link you had with your enemy.”

Harry looked at him speechless for several seconds, before asking the important question. “How comes you know so much about me?”

The man smiled. "That should be a secret, but I sense your intention of prying that information from my mind-"

"I wouldn't-"

"Correction: you haven't yet. I know you would, if you feel threatened."

Harry looked at the man intently. "Should I?"

Leonardo answered by a stare of his own, although the mask enhanced it. After a moment, he sighed and turned back to look outside. "No, Odysseus." he said, and Harry marvelled at the ease with which the man had switched to his borrowed name – but he quickly reasoned that Leonardo was already used to this masquerade. "I will give you the reason, but I expect you not to divulge it to anyone." the man continued. "In the same way you are a mind reader, I am a soul reader."

"You read... souls?"

The man acquiesced thoughtfully. "Our usual term is soul weighing, but... yes. It allows me to know several things about you. Since I know you can read minds, I will open my mind to you so that you'll be confident that I'm not your enemy. I know you won't take... undue advantage... of your stay there."

Harry was stunned by the man's offer and he only superficially explored his mind. With a cursory glance there, he noticed that the man was indeed truthful and friendly. He wasn't even hiding things like his private life – not that Harry explored there, mind you. Once his quick exploration was finished, he sat down and nodded at the man.

"I am leading our people in the absence of a local doge, and that gift helped me immensely over time. An ancestor of mine gained it when... well, it's a long story already. I inherited the gift through my bloodline and my education, and I will have to train Saverio for him to be able

to use it as well. My son.” he explained, and Harry understood that he was referring to the boy he had seen in town.

“Why do you tell me all of this?” Harry asked. “I mean... you could have hidden the fact that you know my name, and I wouldn’t have known.”

“As I asked for your help, Odysseus, and as I know you prefer honesty, I preferred to come clear with that. On top of that, I happen to know that, even without the knowledge of our traditions, your enemy has taken ideas during his stay here.”

“Which ideas? And why would you need my help?”

“The masks.” Leonardo merely said, and Harry suddenly remembered the Death Eaters’ usual garb. The man wasn’t finished, though. “And I need your help in getting the current doge to come here so that he could appoint a new one, chosen in the magical population. That way, the magic would flow again, and the city would stop sinking.”

“Venice... sinks?” asked a dumbfounded Harry.

“It had started when we shut ourselves out of the city’s life, and the magical destruction brought forth by your enemy didn’t help. The process slowed when we started patrolling the streets again, but we can’t do much without the proper civic authority, and the regulations of 1372 still wear on us.”

After a moment of silence, Harry nodded. “Alright. I’ll do it. Is there a time better than another to bring the man in?”

“No, any time will do. And I thank you in advance.”

Harry nodded again, before taking a look at his watch. He had left his friends for quite a long time already, and he knew that fetching the Minister of Magic wasn’t going to be a piece of cake. Thinking of which... “Is the doge required to be willing to come?”

Leonardo seemed surprised at the question, before turning thoughtful for a few seconds. "I think that, if the man isn't willing to come to address the problems of the city, it doesn't matter if you bring him under duress or not." he then said. "As long as he's conscious."

Harry smirked and stood, ready to Apparate away.

"Wait!" the man exclaimed. "You might need to show credentials. Even if he's not agreeing, our traditions involve appearances more than anything else."

"What do you mean?"

"You will see right-" he started, before being interrupted by a door opening. "-now." he finished. "Heard everything, dear?"

The masked woman Harry had followed through Venice came in, followed by an elderly man. The man's age was showing through his stance, and even his mask showed age wrinkles. "After putting Saverio to bed for his nap, I heard just enough to recognize that you needed someone." the woman said.

"Galenus." Leonardo said, greeting the old man.

The addressed man looked at the soul-reader and nodded. "Leonardo." he wheezed. "Lisa has been unclear on the reason for my visit, only asking me to bring the birthing kit. Since she was up and about, I suppose you haven't produced another child yet."

"You are right, as usual." Leonardo said, before pointing to Harry. "Meet Odysseus. He is to be fitted."

The elder glanced toward the young man, and he stopped moving at once, the clear blue eyes of his mask appraising the cloaked figure. After a long pause, he spoke again. "It has been a long time." he whispered. "Neither my father nor my grandfather has fitted an adult."

"Err... what are you talking about?" Harry asked. "Is this... fitting... necessary?"

“Do not worry.” Leonardo said. “It is to allow you free movement in the city. You might need it to fetch the doge and to come back. And, who knows, you might like the place.”

“Is it... permanent?” asked Harry, his voice uncharacteristically high.

Galenus had been fetching things from his satchel, and he snorted, while Leonardo smiled. It was Lisa who answered, though. “It is, and it is not. In fact, as far as I know, it creates a magical veil that you can bring up and down on mental command.”

“What about the portal?” Harry asked.

“He did remark it, didn’t he?” Lisa said with a smile, looking at Leonardo. She looked back at Harry to answer. “Except during the Carnival, the portal issues the mental command for us so that we don’t forget.”

Galenus had finished preparing himself, and he addressed Harry directly for the first time. “I will need to work on your face, you know? And, for the mask to be accurate with your appearance and personality, you will have to be as open as possible.”

Harry brought his hands to his hood, before stopping.

“Do not worry.” Leonardo said. “I trust Galenus with my life. And, to respect your privacy, Lisa and I will wait next door.” he finished, taking the hand of his surprised wife and exiting the room.

“What did the old coot mean?” the older man wheezed, clearly surprised at the turn of events.

Harry had caught several thoughts from Leonardo, and he knew that the man had left for him to feel safe enough to display his real face and identity – something which he now knew was essential to be "fitted" with a mask.

His face still hidden, he morphed back into his normal self before lowering his hood. The man in front of him looked perplexed, but he didn't say anything and started to work. While Galenus was applying a clear blue potion on a piece of white silk, Harry opened his mental barriers, ready to slam them closed the moment he'd feel something untoward.

After sticking the mask in place, the man invoked several charms, and Harry felt the mask "melt" on his face. He experienced a short bout of panic when he was unable to breathe for two seconds, but the mask finally settled, and he didn't feel it anymore.

"All done!" exclaimed the old man in his wheezy voice. "Here." he said, producing a mirror from his satchel. "To hide it and to bring it back, just think of the corresponding effect, and, if you concentrate enough, that should do the trick."

Harry looked, and, while the man was stowing his equipment away, he absently raised his Occlumency barriers back to their usual state. To his surprise, under his gaze, the mask changed until it was a pure and unblemished white. He briefly wondered about it, before remembering what had been said before. He then displayed a fake identity on the outskirts of his mental fortress, and the mask returned to its ornate state, although it was different. He then concentrated and succeeded in hiding it and bringing it on again.

"Well, Odysseus, I'm done- what?"

The old man had finished arranging his affairs and he was now looking at Harry, and he seemed surprised at finding a different mask than the one he had made. At the same moment, though, Leonardo and Lisa entered the room again.

"Well..." the man started, looking at the mask approvingly. "You have to say, Galenus, you haven't lost your touch."

"It's not my job." the elder said. "I know masks can change in the course of a man's life, but the mask I made was resolutely different from this one."

“I know, I know.” Leonardo said, trying to appease the man.

“You know?” asked Galenus suspiciously, and the glimmer of understanding soon came to his eyes. “Of course... you would know.”

The host acquiesced, before turning to Harry. “See what I mean? Not everybody here knows about my little secret. Galenus does.”

The named man looked at him intently, his arms crossed on his chest. “I think we ought to have quite a lengthy conversation, oh young and enlightened one.”

“We ought, now, ought we?” Leonardo answered cryptically, before turning to Harry again. “Don’t worry about your secrets.” he whispered.

Harry nodded, his peripheral Legilimency having caught the truthfulness behind the man’s words. After taking his leave, he followed Lisa out of the room and across the town, to the portal they had used earlier. The two guards merely cast a glance at him and, seeing the mask, they returned to their stern stance.

Harry thanked Lisa, and passed the doorway.

At the exact same moment, two persons appeared in the middle of Leonardo’s den, interrupting the conversation that was held there. The doorway passed, Harry looked at his watch, and he noticed that it was late already. He idly wondered about his friends, and reflected that there was a way for him to meet them without seeking their whereabouts. After all, he knew their location at the precise moment he had started to follow the magical woman through Venice, a couple hours ago.

He was idly toying with the idea of using the Time Turner when another thought struck him: he had accepted Leonardo’s mission, and he would have to bring the Minister here. He knew he had to act quickly, because, as the Daily Prophet indicated, the election for a

new Minister was going to happen soon. He also knew he couldn't act right now because the Ministry was surely closed. He would have to wait until tomorrow, at the very least.

Unless...

The concept of travelling back into time came in his mind again, and he smiled. After a quick look around to check that no one was near, he extracted the silver hourglass medallion from under his shirt, and he turned the hourglass three times.

Like the last time he had used it, he felt himself dragged by an unseen force, as the scene around him seemed to move, and was, at the same time, not moving at all. It was quite unnerving, and, like last time, Harry paused for a few minutes afterwards, in order to catch his breath. As he was doing so, hidden in the gaseous reality, he noticed the little boy he now knew as Saverio exiting the portal alone and starting to wander around. He had half the mind of fetching him, but he knew he couldn't, as it would have disturbed the space-time continuum relative to his very presence here.

He let the boy run, and left towards England.

Once at the Ministry's Apparation point, he subjected himself to the customary identity check and wand weighing – he was going as Jerry Homest and used Flamel's wand – and headed towards the Minister's office. However, he was blocked at the entrance by the young assistant, who honestly told him that her boss wasn't there, and that reporters had to congregate in the debate room downstairs.

After fetching the room's location from her memories, he turned towards the door to leave. At that moment, though, his heightened senses picked a presence in the Minister's inner office. Several persons, in fact, and they all had ill intentions. Using his ring, he Stunned the assistant, and he quickly removed the previous seconds from her memories.

He then barged in the Minister's office and noticed that there were three people there, noisily rummaging through the office – the door had muted the sound – as if searching for something. They stopped

right there and Harry had barely half a second to assess the situation before the Minister's armchair flew towards him.

Without any other option, he rolled on the floor and evaded the heavy seat, which crashed on the office door, slamming it shut. However, it appeared that the men he was fighting were cleverer than your usual Death Eater, and they continued to attack, casting spells without waiting for him to stand up again. Harry was hit by a Bone-Shattering curse and the Cruciatus, and, his thought processes barely overcoming the pain, he realized that he had to act quickly if he wanted to get out of there in one piece.

Internally cursing his lack of preparation – he could have drawn his bow, at least – he took advantage of a lull in the Cruciatus to leap over the desk and Apparated out in mid-jump, in a position that allowed him to see the whole room. The anti-Apparation wards were still there, of course, but he still could disappear from the tangible reality. He was simply stuck, motionless, in the solidified gaseous reality. He hadn't wanted to do that to escape the hurled armchair earlier, though, because that would have forced him to reappear in the midst of the now-broken piece of furniture – either splinching him or taking a long time to move the thing out of the way through partial Apparation.

His disappearance shocked the three men there, and they threw several spells toward him and around the office, but they didn't find anything. Harry was a bit miffed, however, to find that their destructive spells had broken the ceiling lighting, which was now hanging through him – preventing him from Apparating in quickly.

He pushed that particular concern to the side of his mind, and concentrated on the wizards' minds, starting by the weakest one. After complaining from a headache for a couple seconds, the wizard fell down, out for the count, his consciousness bound and gagged in a corner of his brain's command centre. When the second one started complaining as well, the third wizard – the one who, thanks to his imposing stature, had physically thrown the armchair earlier – realized that something was off, and he took something from his pocket just as the second man fell down. Turning his attention towards his last prey, Harry tried to freeze him mentally. The man had

better defences around his mind, however, and he activated the portkey, disappearing from the ruined office just as Harry was battering his mental walls.

Harry's consciousness was thrown back in his own body and he swore, before taking hold of the second man's body. He made him repair the ceiling and its lighting fixtures with the all-purpose Repairing spell so that he could Apparate in again. A sharp pain reminded him of his wounds, and he used his medical knowledge and Metamorphmagus powers to heal himself. He then used Merlin's wand to magically repair the whole office in one go.

As he had some time to himself, he decided to dwell in the two minds there, concentrating on their identities and loyalties. He quickly discovered that the two captured men were Ministry workers who spied on their respective Department Heads, and who reported to Ursinus Derrick, the man who had just escaped. Derrick had enrolled them for a search mission in the Minister's office, but they didn't know exactly why: they had just been given the task to search for all documents about Harry Potter, Voldemort, and Egypt. Delving deeper in their memories, Harry extracted the content of several of these papers, and he realized that Derrick's goal was not only to gather information, but to remove it from the current Minister's view. Was it for blackmail purposes? To save his own skin should Fudge lose the election? To prevent the next Minister to have access to them? Harry didn't know and it annoyed him, and he decided to do something about Derrick as soon as possible.

Not wanting to let loose two uncontrolled spies in the Ministry, he carefully arranged their memories so that they wouldn't spy anymore. It was better than Obliviating them, because they wouldn't have missing memories, and other Legilimens wouldn't find a trace of the memory update. He also used a Stunner to keep them asleep while he released their consciousnesses from their bounds.

Reflecting about the slumber the men were in, he remembered the assistant next door, and he left to wake her, before escorting her out – the battle and his subsequent actions had lasted a couple dozen minutes, and her shift had ended already.

When he came back, he heard the Minister's angry voice as the man lashed on the two workers. Harry winced, and realized that the ordinarily pompous man was genuinely angry. He reflected that the debate mustn't have been a success and decided to step in. After all, the two workers didn't have a clue as to why they were there.

Harry summoned his mask, using Jerry Homest's personality to decorate it, before transfiguring his cape into a brilliant purple silk cloak with sparkling points enhancing it. He then entered the Minister's office, effectively cutting the man's rant mid-stride.

After several shocked seconds, Fudge reacted and addressed him. "Who are you?" he asked warily.

"My name has no meaning." Harry answered in a deep voice. "But you may call me Odysseus."

The Minister was still angry, and Harry was bringing him another target to pick on. "What kind of a name is that?" he demanded.

"I didn't say it was my name; just that you could call me that."

Fudge pinched the bridge of his nose. He was not in the mood for mind games. "Why are you here?"

Harry looked at the two men there, his mask severe, and they took the hint. Once they were gone, Harry closed the door and addressed Fudge again. "I'm here because you, as British Minister of Magic, have the position of Duke of Venice, Dalmatia, and Istria. It's something that has been negotiated behind our backs, something that needs to be corrected soon: since the position had been out of Venice, troubles have occurred, and we need the position to be given back to where it belongs."

"What do I have to gain?" the Minister asked, perking up at the possible profit.

“If you do so willingly, you will be remembered as someone who brought an end to several centuries of difficulties for the Venetian magical community.”

“Willingly? Are you going to force me?” When Harry didn’t answer, Fudge paled for a second, before turning red in anger. “How dare you! I’m the Minister of Magic! If I own your pathetic little town, I’ll do as I please with it!”

“Very well.” Harry calmly replied, slowly bringing his right arm out of the confines of his cloak.

“What?”

“Stupefy.”

Harry looked as the man fell back in his armchair, and wondered why he always had to take the difficult path. Not being able to Apparate out of the building because of the wards, he dismissed his mask and cloak, before taking Fudge’s appearance. This done, he retrieved the Minister’s wand before shrinking him, so that he could put both in his pockets.

After a quick stroll through the Ministry, he arrived at the Apparation point and disappeared.

Several minutes later, he arrived near Venice, and, as he knew where to go, he passed through the invisibility ward and Apparated in Leonardo’s den, interrupting the conversation that was held there.

“Odysseus?” asked Leonardo.

“The one and only.” answered Harry. “I got what you asked.”

“So soon? Where?”

Harry nodded, before producing the unconscious and shrunk Minister from his pocket. He enlarged and revived him, and Fudge shot up, still angry. He soon calmed himself, though, when he noticed that he

wasn't in his office anymore. And three of these masked persons were looming over him.

"Wha... you Death Eaters!" the man exclaimed. "I'll... I'll..." he stuttered, patting himself frantically.

"Searching for your wand, Minister?" Harry asked. "I'll give it back on one condition."

"The British Minister of Magic does not negotiate with dark wizards." Fudge said pompously. After a couple of seconds, however, he seemed to deflate. "I mean... you aren't dark wizards, right?" he asked, but the others didn't answer and he sighed. "Very well. What do you want?"

Leonardo had been arranging his desk during the exchange, and he addressed the portly man. "For the magical community in Venice to thrive, and for the town itself to survive, it is necessary that you relinquish your position as Doge. You only have to copy, in your blood, the letter that I prepared for you." he finished, handing him a sheet of parchment. It was short and to the point.

I, Cornelius Oswald Fudge, current Minister of Magic of Britain and thus current Doge of Venice, hereby relinquish the position of Doge to Leonardo, Vittore Alighieri.

Done on August 24th, in year 1425 since the Founding of Venice.

Fudge looked at the missive in wonder, before frowning. "What is this?" he asked.

Harry snorted, having intercepted the man's thoughts. "You didn't even know?" he asked. Actually, it was to inform the two Venetians of his discovery more than to confirm a hunch.

"Who's that Leonardo? And what is this Dog thing-?" Fudge started, but Galenus interrupted, his wheezing voice clearly indignant at the man's rudeness.

“It’s Doge!”

“Leonardo is right here.” Harry said, pointing at the man. “Just do it.” he finished with an annoyed expression.

“Or what?” Fudge asked shrewdly. “After all, if I understand correctly, this is a position of power.”

The three men looked at each other briefly, and Harry approached the pompous Minister. “Leonardo asked you gently, thinking that you would be kind to do it in order to keep peace and order in the city. Now, if you refuse, I have other means of persuasion.”

Fudge looked at the mask in apprehension. During Harry’s short speech, his external personality had changed, and the mask was now an ominous face looking as though it was sculpted in obsidian – except that it wasn’t immobile. “All right, all right.” he finally relented, and took the proffered knife and cup to get a sample of his own blood.

A couple of minutes later, the letter was finished, and Galenus countersigned it to acknowledge his presence as witness of the event.

While the magic involved in the change of ruler took place, Harry quickly Stunned the Minister again, so that he’d be able to displace him quickly later. He was then profusely thanked by the two Venetian wizards, and he noticed that Leonardo’s countenance was even more commanding than before. As if the people’s ranks was shown by their outside appearance.

“I can’t express the gratitude I have toward you, Odysseus.” Leonardo was saying, while Galenus nodded along. “The townspeople will be glad for Venice to be strengthened by the old laws again. To thank you properly, I will start by giving you this.”

The man extended an empty hand, and, after a moment of concentration, the magic linked to the position created a ring in his outstretched hand. A platinum ring with a winged lion etched on it. “Take this.” he said. “It’s a signet ring for the old Venetian Knighthood, the Cavalieri di San Marco. It has the side effect of allowing you to

get anything you wish from the local merchants, for free.” he raised his hand when he noticed that Harry, after putting the ring next to his phoenix ring, was now trying to remove it, presumably to give it back. “Keep it! I know you won’t take undue advantage of it, so I’m not worried about giving it to you. Don’t worry about losing it either: now that you have put it on your finger, it’s linked to your blood, and will deteriorate if put on someone else’s.” Leonardo then looked at Harry intently before adding “I know you might be involved in other affairs, so, as the Doge and Head of the Knighthood, I hereby allow you to join other Knightly Orders. If you can, though, I’d like you to be here on September 15th for the first meeting of our Knighthood in a long time.”

As Leonardo finished, Galenus approached Harry. “I don’t have the power of a Doge, but I want to express my thanks too.”

“Really,” Harry started, “there’s no need to-”

“I insist. And, given how you are able to modify the mask, I feel it will be interesting for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your mind must be very focused, because the mask takes its aspect from the wearer’s mind. If one was to wear such a kind of mask on their whole body, it would allow them to change their clothes with just a thought. Do you want to try it?”

“Yes, but... what about my other clothes?”

“As you might notice, or not, I have glasses, hidden by the mask, and a hood over it. Likewise, the magic of the garment will allow you to wear it over or under selected pieces of garment you might have already or don afterwards. Are you pondering what I’m pondering?”

“What do you mean?”

“Were you reflecting about armour?”

“Armour?”

“Yes. The magical garment I’m talking about is highly resistant and can even be morphed into metal armour, but you might like to wear a real set of armour on top of it. Or under it. It could be useful to wear a top-of-the-range metal plate armour over it, for instance.”

Harry shook his head noncommittally, impressed about the gift but also sad that the man didn’t have a clue about the military progresses that had been made in the muggle world since three centuries. Metal plate armours were just not top-of-the-range anymore. Nevertheless, he knew that the thing would be very useful, and he thanked Galenus abundantly. The old man repeated his own thanks and headed out, telling him that he was going to work on the materials, and that the cloak would be ready the next day.

After thanking the old man once again, Harry asked Leonardo if he could bring friends the next day. The new Doge answered him that, as he was now Knight of the town, he would be able to vouch for anyone entering with him, as long as he accompanied them all the time, and with the provision that they would be masked.

After taking his leave, Harry grabbed the prone body of the Minister of Magic and Apparated back to England. He unceremoniously dropped the portly man in his office, before slightly modifying his memories. This done, he revived him from the doorway and headed out.

He then returned to Venice and, after turning back the time again, he finished the day with his friends. When Tracey asked about his findings and about the ring at his finger, he told her to wait for the next day – after all, in this timeframe, even if Harry had the ring, Leonardo wasn’t Doge yet.

That evening, they all lounged in the hotel contentedly. They soon started retelling stories, and, when it was Bill’s turn, the young man unknowingly chose to relate an anecdote that would interest Harry’s closest friends.

“I don’t know if you remember what I did, three years ago, but-”

Fred snorted, interrupting the tale. "All we know, brother dear-"

"-is that you break curses in Egypt for Gringotts-" George continued.

"-but we still wonder-"

"-why you stopped." they finished together.

"Ah, well..." Bill said, frowning. "I don't know."

"You don't know, dear?" Molly Weasley asked. "I hope they didn't fire you! I warned you, you know."

Bill looked at her inquiringly. "What do you mean, mum?"

"That earring and hair cut – or lack thereof, rather – had to earn you troubles. You want help? My friend Darcy owns a beauty salon, you know, and-"

"Mum!" came the indignant cry from all the young redheads in attendance, and the bustling woman stopped her rant.

Bill sighed. "It has nothing to do with this. In fact, I'm not even fired. It's just that I received an enormous salary last Christmas, and I don't even know why. That's why I chose to spend some quality time with my family."

Molly Weasley blushed at the underlying praise, but her blush receded when she thought about his preceding words. The whole Weasley family was sending Bill enquiring but concerned gazes at that point. "It was nothing illegal, at least?" Molly asked.

"I don't think so." he answered. "All I remember is my Goblin boss giving me the check with a smile. If he gave it to me, it's surely legal. And if he smiled that way, he must have made a hefty percentage on it."

Hearing this, Harry thought that he should help him recover his memory. And, judging by the sideways glance Ron and Ginny were throwing him, he wasn't alone thinking that way.

Bill shook himself awake. "Anyways, that was not what I wanted to tell you about."

"Sorry." interrupted the twins at the same time, but the mischievous glint in their eyes told him otherwise.

"Right. Well... there I was, checking out after a day of research, when I met someone."

Harry stifled a snort when he noticed Hermione's expression at the word "research". A particular redhead didn't have the same level of control, however. Bill glared as Ron had interrupted his storytelling. "What?" the younger sibling said when he noticed the stare. He quickly recognized the reason why almost everyone was looking at him. "Oh. Sorry." he said, blushing.

"Do you remember last year's articles in the Daily Prophet?" Bill asked. When he noticed the looks around him, he realized that they had no idea of which article he was talking about, and he elaborated. "About Harry Potter."

Harry, sitting next to Tracey, was toying with her hair when his name was pronounced. He looked up sharply and noticed that he wasn't the only one to do so.

Bill, however, was oblivious of the real reason behind the reaction of several members of his audience. "In the interview, he said that he travelled in several countries of the mid-east."

"What's the link?" asked Percy.

"I'm coming to it. So, here I was, after a day of work, and there's a boy looking in wonder at the temple of Ra in Luxor – that's in Egypt, Ron. Since there are ages-old wards around some of these magical temples, I knew the boy was magical and I tried to chat with him a bit.

Retrospectively, I think I taught him a bit of vocabulary of the wizarding world.”

Bill fell silent for a couple seconds, and Harry thought ‘That you did, indeed.’

“What does it have to do with Harry Potter?” Ron enquired.

“He told me his name was Harry.”

“And you jumped to the conclusion that he was Harry Potter, the boy sought after by the most powerful wizards around... how?” asked Percy.

“Well... it’s just a hunch, you know.” Bill replied. “There are not that many occidental boys of that age travelling alone in a valley of magically concealed temples. And he told me he was “on the road”, something he repeated in the article.”

“Still... it’s a bit far-fetched, don’t you think?” Molly asked.

Bill looked down. “There’s a bit more. When I was leading him toward the parking lot-”

“The what?” Ginny asked.

“The place where muggles park their cars.” he answered, before pinching the bridge of his nose. “Where was I?”

After a hesitant look at Harry, Ron answered. “You were leading him toward the... park.”

“Yes. Well, I felt a surge of magical power around me.”

“It might have been anything!” Ginny exclaimed.

“Yes, but I checked later with the project leader, and no wizard was in the vicinity at that moment, except the two of us. No charm either, I

checked. The surge being quite powerful, I recently reflected that it might have been... him."

"That's all?" asked Percy. When Bill nodded, Percy counted on his fingers. "You found a boy who had the required age, was alone and said he travelled around a lot, and whose given name is Harry. You felt an unknown surge of power. Do I sum it up appropriately?" he enquired with a smug smile, while passing his arm around his girlfriend.

Bill looked at him with an angered gleam in his eyes. He opened his mouth to rant at his pompous brother when a thought came to him. "That's not all. The boy said he was coming back the next day, and he didn't show himself. No one had seen him around the town after that day. However, several strange events were recounted by my colleagues, two of which had sufficient backing to be believed."

"What is it?" Harry asked, now genuinely interested.

"The town's police caught a near-whole sect of Hashishins – it's a sect of killers – next to a dead wizard, a few days later. Once prodded, they said the dead man had asked them to kill him, but I don't see anyone ordering his own suicide. A few days later, the last members of the sect were caught and, when shown the dead wizard, they recognized him and told the policemen their version of the story. It seems that the man has asked them to kill a boy, actually. Despite several shootings witnessed, there was no trace of that particular boy later."

Bill paused to catch his breath, before continuing. "I only heard about the second event right after I started my sabbatical. The local Unspeakables were called because of a rumour concerning a demon, but they only confirmed that it wasn't anything else than that: a rumour. However, I have been told that the memories of some of the desert-dwelling tribesmen included a boy able to fight better than a grown man. It appears that he fought for the right to pass through the desert, with the life of his companions on the line. And when I enquired about his appearance, my colleagues confirmed that it was the same boy than I met. I don't think it can be anyone else than

Potter. Which other 10-year old boy could have taken take on a 250-pound opponent with bare hands?”

Harry was hearing this for the first time, and, despite being a bit miffed at having left tracks of his passage, he was now more annoyed at his friends’ reaction. Fred and George, Ron, Ginny, Hermione, and Tracey were all looking at him with varied expressions ranging between awe and anxiety.

‘Turn around, please. Now.’ he mentally sent, and they jumped before complying. Fred and George looked at each other, while Ron’s gaze returned to Bill. Tracey and Ginny looked around aimlessly, and Hermione’s gaze focused on her right shoe.

In the meantime, however, Harry had caught a name he had heard already, although it was a long time ago. As Bill had finished his tale, he cleared his throat and addressed him. “Bill? You spoke about a temple of Ra...”

“Yes, why?”

“I heard about a magical artefact called the Eye of Ra, once. Do you happen to know what it is?”

The question sent Bill into a short trance-like state, his eyes turning glassy for a couple of seconds. For everyone else, the man was gathering his memories to answer, but Harry recognized the pattern with his peripheral Legilimency: Bill was searching his memories frantically, knowing that data was there but not finding it. With a start, Harry understood that whatever answer Bill would give him was tainted by a memory charm.

“All I know is that it’s a eye-like sign, sometimes called the Eye of Horus instead. I thought I knew more about it, but I seem to have forgotten about it.”

Harry sensed an opening and he mentally warned Tracey before speaking up again. “I can help you with that. Have you ever been hypnotized?”

Right on cue, Tracey jumped up and, acting cheery, she clapped her hands together. "Oh, yes! Hypnosis! Cousin Harvey is a specialist of this thing."

"What is it?" Bill asked.

"It helps you find memories you thought you forgot." Hermione interjected, having noticed the exchange. "It is the muggle equivalent of a memory restoration charm."

Ron's eyes widened in bewilderment. "Muggles can do that?" he asked.

"I didn't say it worked all the time!" Hermione defended. "There are people firmly believing that it works, though." she finished, her tone firmly telling that she wasn't one of them.

"Alright." Bill interrupted. "I don't think it will work, but we can give it a try."

While Tracey was directing Bill so that the man was sitting comfortably, Harry took his locket necklace off his neck. He then moved it back and forth in front of him, speaking the words one could hear from any would-be hypnotiser.

"Bill, you are going to focus on my voice... Listen to it attentively... Imagine that it's your lifeline... that it will keep you safe... You are feeling relaxed, now, holding to my voice... Forget everything else... You are so relaxed that you could be sleeping..."

Carrying on speaking like that, Harry entered the man's mind. There, he quickly jumped over the barricade and found himself in Bill's mind. After several seconds of exploring it, he found the spot that had been updated. To Harry, who has some experience in dealing with minds, it seemed as though Bill had been the target of an Obliviation spell. The spell was known to remove specific memories, and possibly update others if it was cast with enough focus. On Bill, however, it seemed that the focus hadn't been perfect, because memory bits were resting

around a small crater, where the original memory must have been standing.

Harry collected them, and he realized a few things: Bill had worked for unidentifiable dark wizards, opening the way into ages-old ruins, and he had witnessed a dark wizard Levitating the Eye of Ra so as to serve as entrance point to the temple-fortress of Wadjet. Nothing else remained, and Harry now knew why the young man had been paid so much. Harry didn't have to ask about the significance of Wadjet, though: it was already the name of his cobra, and he knew it was the name of the Egyptian goddess of snakes.

A temple dedicated to snakes...

Remembering his visions, Harry gasped. Bill's employer had been Voldemort! It was lucky that the red-haired man was still alive and well, to start with. With reason, he suspected that, should Bill have worked as a freelance Charm Breaker and not with the Goblins, things would have been different.

He looked at Tracey and Hermione, who were looking at him inquiringly already, and a flow of thoughts travelled back and forth. The two girls stepped back, and Harry threw a privacy charm around him and Bill.

"What is it?" Bill asked. Even relaxed a bit – mainly through his comfortable position and Harry's voice – he had noticed Harry's gasp and the charm.

"I have to tell you things that have to stay private."

"What do you mean? Did the hypnosis work?"

"Quite, yes. I now know why you got paid so much, but it's not something you will want to repeat..."

Bill straightened up. "I'm ready."

Harry looked at him appraisingly and noticed the man's strength of character. 'Interesting,' he thought, 'If he stomachs this one, I should ask him to join me. He has already met me once, after all.' He then recounted his findings, and, truth be told, Bill paled at the mention of his work for Voldemort. He knew how the Goblins worked, though, and knew that it wasn't possible for him to attack his employer against this. After all, the evil man hadn't hired him personally, using one of his underlings to deal with the Goblins.

After a couple of minutes of pause, Harry spoke again. "I didn't search for that information, but do you know the location of that temple? I might visit it someday and bring some friends."

"No. I'm sorry, but I don't remember it." Bill replied, frowning at the reminder of having been Obliviated. "Now that I know about it, however, I could search in the Goblin library in Thebes. It has the most comprehensive work about magical temples and tombs in Egypt."

Harry acquiesced, thankful of the man for offering his help without being asked.

"Alright, then." Bill said, straightening up. "I'll owl you whenever I find something."

"Err... I think it'd be better to owl the post office of Diagon Alley instead." Harry said, working up an excuse as he went. "I work in a muggle hospital, and I'd rather not receive owls there."

The young man nodded, and Harry dispelled the privacy charm. To Bill's surprise, nobody asked him about the time he had just spent in hypnosis. He quickly realized, though, that it was because they were quite taken by the youngsters' recounting of Hogwarts' everyday life. Not noticing the understanding glance between Harry and them, he sat down and enjoyed the storytelling.

After a good night of rest, Harry gathered his closest friends and told them about his findings concerning the magical part of Venice. Granting their request to visit the place, he used his knighthood ring to vouch for them at the magic portal. To appear even more genuine,

he had also donned a crimson cape transfigured from a paper napkin – he had been said that it was the colour of those knights whose order he now belonged to.

The small group spent a couple of hours exploring the wizarding location. It wasn't large, but they found some interesting shops and other places to visit. Sure, these weren't many tourist-oriented businesses, given that they were the first tourists in almost two centuries. And, consequently, the first modern-era tourists ever. They gained the attention of several townspeople, but Harry's crimson robe prevented hostility towards his friends.

After a while, Harry went to the new Doge's apartments, where he introduced his friends to Leonardo. Galenus was there, too, and he gave him the garment he had been preparing, explaining him how it worked. At the same time, Leonardo was looking at Harry's friends intently, and, to everyone's surprise, he offered them Venetian citizenship as well. Galenus complained good-naturedly about it, before explaining that the citizenship came with a mask from him. Harry knew that Leonardo was gifted to be a good judge of character, and it reinforced his devotion to his friends. A short moment later, the five friends left the magical place in a thoughtful mood. After all, the mischief-making possibilities given by the masks were quite numerous, if not endless.

The whole family disappeared with Harry a couple hours later. After leaving the Prewetts in France, Harry also brought the Weasley back to the Burrow. He then deposited Tracey in Newcastle, before heading to Hogwarts for the last week of holidays. He knew that Tracey wouldn't be alone, though: he had decided to use the Time Turner to repeat the days he spent at Hogwarts with her. Wadjet's temple, at the same time...

In the meeting room, numerous Death Eaters were assembled around Voldemort, chanting the incantation with him. There was only one of them not chanting: Snape. The greasy-haired ex-Potion professor had learnt about being thrown out of Hogwarts and had, since then, invested himself in his Potion Master's tasks for

Voldemort. Contrarily to Dumbledore, the Dark Lord had given him apprentices to actually make the simpler potions, and Snape had started to research more powerful potions to be used by Voldemort and the Death Eaters.

That's why the man was not chanting: he was busy adding ingredients and turning the ladle appropriately, while his brethren and their master added power in the potion.

When the incantation was finished, Snape turned the fire out, and, as if on cue, four members of Voldemort's Inner Circle approached: Antonin Dolohov, Augustus Rookwood, Lucius Malfoy, and Rodolphus Lestrage. Snape measured the appropriate doses and handed them out – there could only be four doses per brewing, and they had to be consumed immediately. As requested, the four men drank the potion and stepped back, conscious that everyone's gaze was fixed on them.

It was an experimental potion, and reacted as such: unpredictably.

Dolohov screamed his voice off, and grabbed at his own face frantically. In front of the surprised Death Eaters, the man scratched his skin and clawed his eyes out before Snape was able to stop him with a strong Stunner.

Right afterwards, Rookwood winced suddenly, and brought his hands to his belly in a desperate manner. Snape didn't have to Stun him, though, as the man crumbled to the floor in an undignified and unconscious heap. However, as he was doing so, several Death Eaters gasped as the man's skin and hair went from their usual pallid tinge to the opposite of the spectrum: pitch black. Snape prodded the blackened skin, but it was just that: normal skin.

Witnessing the two others' reaction to the potion, Malfoy had paled dramatically, but nothing seemed to happen. When he was sure of it, he shrugged. But he didn't recover his normal complexion, staying white as a sheet.

Like Malfoy, Lestrage didn't seem to react to the potion for several seconds. He suddenly raised his hand to his face, though, looking at

it curiously. In front of the surprised assembly, the hand now had impressive claws. Lestrangle's body continued to change, growing out of his clothes and shredding them in the process. The final result was a creature mid-way between a man and an unknown feline. It had the feet of a man, keeping him upright, while the legs were bent like a cat's. The torso, arms, and hands were of a man, while the claws were those of a large feline. The head was the most disturbing sight, showing a mix of feline and human features. The creature was also displaying a reddish fur, and it was towering over the others, reaching the impressive height of seven feet and a couple of inches.

It was not a werewolf, not at all, but it was definitely a lethal creature worthy of the late Fenrir Greyback.

"Rodolphus?" a voice asked, and the creature that was Rodolphus Lestrangle looked at the person calling him. It was his wife, Bellatrix, and she was looking at a particular part of his anatomy which, despite the fur, was clearly visible thanks to the lack of clothes. She licked her lips as the interest of the beast was clearly roused, and Rodolphus acted accordingly.

In one bound, he was next to her, and, in two, he was at the door, Bellatrix squealing in delight in his powerful arms.

"That's... an interesting development." Voldemort hissed, before turning his attention to Malfoy. "Nothing?"

"Now that you ask, my lord, I feel... hungry."

"Hungry for what?" asked Snape, his wand trained on the man.

Lucius Malfoy's gaze went to the wand, then to the man holding it, before turning towards the assembled Death Eaters, seeming to search for something. When he found it, he smiled, and several people gasped. The man had grown fangs equivalent to those of a vampire. The person he was looking at started to tremble in apprehension.

“Step forward!” Voldemort ordered, and the person – clearly a woman – reluctantly obeyed. However, when Malfoy approached her – stalked her, actually –, she lost her countenance and took a couple of steps backwards. Snape reacted immediately and, after half a second of hesitation between Stunning her and putting her under a full body bind on her, he chose the latter.

Malfoy ripped the woman’s mask and revealed a young face, belonging to a new recruit from the Ministry.

“What is it that you like in her?” asked Snape, eager for information about his potion.

“She’s pure... Despite the Mark, she’s untainted. I hunger for it.”

“Are you a virgin?” Snape asked the girl, dumbfounded.

The fear in her eyes was almost palpable, and was the only answer Snape needed. After that, the girl wouldn’t answer anything or anyone, Malfoy having lunged on her. Like a vampire, he was feasting on her blood, and the other Death Eaters stood there, shocked.

When Malfoy released her dead body, everyone had a second shock. The girl’s body had wilted, to the point of it being barely recognizable. And the man had changed as well. He was a bit taller, and his hair and eyes had lightened: instead of the previous grey-streaked blond hair, he was now sporting purely white hair and eyes. He looked around, and the people nearest to him shuddered at his unnaturally white eyes.

“How do you feel?” Snape asked.

“Better. Still hungry, but I can wait, now. More powerful, though. I have absorbed her, it seems.”

“Completely? Are you controlled by her?”

“Me, controlled by that girl?” Malfoy retorted with his trademark sneer in place, startling more than one person there. Since his imprisonment, the man hadn’t smiled, but he seemed to have recovered, thanks to his... snack. After that exclamation, there was no doubt about his sanity either.

“That’s interesting as well.” Voldemort commented, his hissing voice stilling the room as was customary. “Especially since there will be many virgins at your disposal soon.”

Malfoy understood immediately. As a member of the Inner Circle, he was privy to the Dark Lord’s plans, and knew that a whole train of pure virgins was awaiting him in a few days. All those witches’ power, added to his own... it was almost in sensual pleasure that he groaned his impatience.

Voldemort noticed this and the corners of his scaly mouth lifted, in a manner of a smile. It was a scary sight, but Malfoy knew his master, now, and, startled out of his reverie, he smiled as well. Three days later...

Diagon Alley was under the usual back-to-school rush of the last week-end of August. Followed by anxious parents, students of all ages crowded the shops, especially Madam Malkin’s and Flourish and Blotts. Other shops were visited, of course: the Apothecary got the visit of each student to buy or refresh Potion kits, but the students didn’t stay in the smelly shop. Conversely, while not selling anything from the list of customary school supplies, Florean Fortescue’s Ice Cream Parlour and Quality Quidditch Supplies saw many students stop by and discuss.

On top of the student bustle, the adult wizards and witches were discussing the upcoming election.

The election was held in two phases. That Saturday, every adult witch and wizard who wanted to vote could send a specially-formulated message to the members of the Wizengamot they thought were representing their ideas. The next day, the wizarding ruling group would congregate to elect the Minister, based on the wishes of

the members and the number of votes they had received from the general public.

Diagon Alley was bustling with people talking about the election. Some muggleborns wondered how it was possible to have a fair vote by sending one's wishes to several Wizengamot members. Most of the conversations, however, were including comparisons between Fudge and Scrimgeour and questions about why the other contenders removed themselves from the game early. Judging by the conversations, it would have been a bad idea for Fudge to take a stroll in the magical street, that day.

In the crowd, Harry's current shape – Harvey Jefferson, a broad-shouldered adult – was an asset, as he was able to drag his friends through the sea of people bustling in the magical place. That allowed them to finish their shopping relatively quickly – despite Hermione spending a whole hour in the bookshop and Ron spending the same time looking at the newly-released broom in awe. The Firebolt prototype that was on display attracted each and every student interested in Quidditch in general.

When Harry and his other friends succeeded in dragging Ron out of there, the boy was gushing about the broom's properties. As they entered Fortescue's and sat at one of the few tables available, he was still going on.

“...and it's the fastest broom on the market! It's a racing broom, in fact, and it can speed up to 150mph in 10 seconds!”

“Ron...” Hermione began.

The boy ignored her, though. “They adapted it to Quidditch only recently, and there's plenty of charms on it, even a Braking Charm. On has to have one, you know, because, at 150mph, you have to strike something or someone on the Pitch, and-”

“Ron!” Hermione exclaimed, trying to stop the boy's outburst.

“-there’s nothing that... What?” Ron asked, finally noticing Hermione’s annoyed face.

Restraining herself from ranting at his obsession – especially because she knew that it wasn’t the wisest thing to do – she pointed at the ice cream counter. “As we asked you three times already, what do you want?”

“A Firebolt.” he immediately answered, before blushing, realizing what the question was about. “Sorry. Chocolate.”

Hermione nodded and headed to the counter while Ron was continuing repeating the Firebolt data sheet over and over, although it was more to himself now.

When Hermione came back from the counter, she was noticed by a couple at a nearby table. Consequently, as she reached the table, Neville joined them, followed by a girl whom he was holding hands with. A girl the Gryffindors recognized immediately.

“Katie?” asked the Weasley twins in surprise.

“Hi all.” she answered, a broad smile on her face.

“Can we join you?” Neville enquired.

When they all nodded, the two fetched their chairs and ice creams and took place. It was a little cramped, but they were all in good company and didn’t care.

“Well, Neville, there’s something you’d like to tell us?” Fred asked with a mischievous gleam in his eyes.

The addressed boy smiled and raised the hand he was using to hold Katie’s. “I think you figured it out already.”

“Aren’t you afraid that some people might see your relationship badly?” asked George.

Katie looked at him with a wicked gleam. "Well... if some people wanted to declare themselves, it's too late, now."

"Besides," Neville continued, "if some people think that a couple pranks will make me change my mind, they are quite mistaken. I'm in love with her." he said, his arm encircling Katie's shoulders. That declaration and move made some of the girls look at her in envy, while some of the boys looked at Neville with newfound respect. At their age, it wasn't an easy thing to declare oneself and Neville seemed to have been the first. Who'd have guessed?

Under the table, Tracey's hand reached out and grabbed Harry's. When he looked into her eyes, she squeezed his hand, and he squeezed back. Not a word was exchanged, but the two of them knew that they would have a private discussion soon. Without onlookers.

George held his hands up. "Alright, alright! I wasn't speaking about myself, though. I have another target in mind."

"Speaking of whom," Katie interrupted, "you should ask Alicia out soon."

While George was stunned speechless, Fred saw an opportunity for their usual bouts of mischief. "Hey! Alicia's mine!"

"No, Fred. She's George's." Katie simply said, making the other twin speechless as well. After all, how could she recognize them when they tried so much to look the same?

"How... how do you know?" George asked.

"After spending two years in Quidditch practises with you, you didn't think I haven't caught little differences between you?"

"I wasn't talking about that." the same George stated, blushing a little.

Neville looked at him, and then at Katie, and he leaned over to whisper something in her ear.

“Oh... right.” she replied, before turning towards the twins again. “Well... promise you won’t tell?” she asked. When they nodded mutely, the others being surprised that Katie had disciplined them that easily, said Katie spoke again. “Your feelings might be returned.”

“Mine?” they both asked at the same time.

Katie smirked. “Yes.” she answered, without elaborating.

After several seconds of shock, and a shared look, Fred and George shot to their feet.

“What are you doing?” asked Ginny. “Mum’s due any minute, now.”

“Scr- urgh, I just didn’t think that.” Fred started.

“We’re going to explore the Alley.” George said.

“Yeah. Explore the Alley. That’s it.”

Harry had listened to the exchange with a smile on his face. Now that the twins were broadcasting thoughts of seeking Alicia Spinnet and Angelina Johnson – the two Gryffindor Chasers beside Katie – he mentally swept the surroundings for the girls, and found them nearby. Alicia was in Madam Malkin’s shop, and Angelina was, unsurprisingly, in the Quidditch shop. However, Mrs Weasley was nearby also, heading to the ice cream parlour. When Harry warned the twins about it, before giving them the girls’ locations, they jumped in surprise, before thanking him the same way. With a broad grin, they headed towards the lavatory just as their mother was entering the place, and exited the shop just when she was reaching the crowded table.

“Ah. There you are.” she said, eyeing the people around the table. “But... where are the twins?”

While Ron and Ginny didn't trust themselves to lie to their mother, Harry didn't have such problems.

"They just left." he said. "Said they missed something at Gambol and Japes. They'll be back soon, eventually."

Molly Weasley seemed ready to burst in anger at her sons' behaviour, but she just huffed before taking the place vacated by the twins. "Yes... eventually." She then looked at the people around the table more attentively. Harry was still in his Harvey Jefferson's shape, and, knowing him from Venice, she exchanged small talk with him for a few seconds, before noticing Neville and Katie. "Well, hello there. Who are you? Wait a second... I know you... You are Frank and Alice's son, aren't you? Netown, it is?"

"Neville, Mrs Weasley." the boy answered. "Neville Longbottom." he said softly, seeming to have recovered his shyness suddenly.

"Ah, yes. Now that you say it, I remember Ron talking about you in his letters at some point. You're in the same dormitory, that's it?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"I'm sorry for you parents, Neville. I knew them, of course, they were the best..." she trailed off, her eyes gaining a faraway look.

Neville had blushed and didn't answer immediately. A few seconds later, he seemed to overcome his nervousness and coughed. "They are fine, thank you, Mrs Weasley. Can I present you my girlfriend, Katie Bell?"

The conversation rolled forward from that point, but Harry and his friends shared a pointed look. Neville had moved the topic away from his parents in quite a sudden fashion, and they suspected that something was afoot. Or had been. In fact, the conversation hadn't given them hints about whether Neville's parents were alive or dead.

Even if he had done so numerous times in the past, Harry wasn't sure that invading the boy's mind to get information about his parents was

really moral. While he was weighing his options, Mrs Weasley stood up and greeted someone. Two someones, in fact. The first was a tall wizard, with straggly blond hair and slightly protuberant eyes. He wore his robe the inside out, but it didn't seem to disturb him in the least. The second person there was a young teenaged witch, with the same dreamy expression and dishevelled hair – although hers was longer. And she was wearing radishes as earrings.

Ron looked at Ginny and they nodded to each other before turning back to the table with an air of long suffering. Finding it curious, Harry addressed them.

“What is it?”

Ron looked at him, then at the strange pair, then back at him. “The Lovegoods.”

“...and?”

The red-haired boy looked around, before pointing at his own forehead. Harry understood, and he retrieved the memory Ron provided him. The Lovegoods, indeed. Xanthippe Lovegood and his daughter Luna. They lived in Ottery St Catchpole, not far from the Weasleys. Alhana Lovegood, Luna's mother, was dead. She had been experimenting with spells, and one of these went wrong and killed her. Actually, no one knew exactly what happened, except that Luna had been found staring at remains that were later identified as belonging to her mother.

As Mrs Lovegood had been a distant relative to Mrs Weasley, the red-haired woman had generously taken upon herself to help them, going there a few times a month and inviting them home as well, and that's how Ron and his siblings knew about them.

Harry was busy sorting the new memories when he suddenly felt that he was observed. Raising his eyes, he found the silvery grey ones of the girl, Luna, looking right at him. She cocked her head to the side and looked at him inquiringly for a few seconds, before walking towards him.

“Have you seen the vampires?” she asked.

“Huh?” was his intelligent answer.

“Don’t they say "Vampire: the Masquerade" in the Muggle world?”

“Err...” was all Harry could produce. A couple of seconds later, seeing that the girl was actually waiting for an answer, he shook himself awake and tried to give her a more intelligible one. “I don’t know. Why?” he asked back.

“I heard it somewhere – quite recently, in fact – when a group of friends played some game of theirs.” she answered. “They even said that I would be a good Malkavian. But they didn’t have the masks, and I figured that it was only a figurative way of playing with figurines. When they started playing with "Werewolf: the Apocalypse", I left them.”

Unperturbed by the others’ troubled glances, she looked at them in quick succession, her gaze resting on Neville last.

“What?” the boy asked.

“You are sad. The king of the fairies can help you.”

Hermione snorted. “The fairies don’t have a king! They are-”

“Are you sure?” asked Luna, looking at her Housemate with wide eyes.

“Of course I’m sure. It’s only a character in a muggle opera!”

“Hermione Granger, right?” Luna asked. “I noticed you last year: you work much harder than the others.” she said, the praise making the bushy-haired girl go red. Her blush receded quickly with Luna’s next sentence, though. “People used to believe the fairy king doesn’t exist, but he does. Like the Crumple-Horned Snorkack, for instance.”

“What’s a Crumple-Horned Snorkack?” Ron asked, genuinely curious.

Tracey snorted lightly and answered with an amused smile. “Sounds like a Snorkack, but with crumpled horns.”

“Exactly!” Luna exclaimed, smiling widely. “Have you seen one? They say they migrate in the forests of Sweden. Did you go there recently?”

Hermione huffed. “There’s no such... There’s nothing about that in the Hogwarts Library!” she exclaimed, rather forcefully.

Harry was observing the exchange, and realized that Luna might just be true. In the few minutes he had known her, she had demonstrated a curious insight about things, and he realized that not having proof of something didn’t mean that it didn’t exist. He also knew that wizards and witches raised in the muggle world should be aware of it more than the other wizarding families. After all, after being told that magic didn’t exist, finding oneself in Hogwarts ought to be an eye-opening experience. It seemed that Hermione had rationalized the thing, though, and the girl had absorbed knowledge from every available book to strengthen her beliefs. The problem with that, though, was the reaction at finding something that wasn’t documented anywhere.

Harry felt that his bushy-haired friend was starting one of her rants, and he started throwing calming thoughts towards her. He didn’t have to do it for long before being interrupted again, this time by a couple of redheads: Fred and George were entering the shop again, sporting identical grins and blushes.

“What have you two been doing?” demanded Mrs Weasley, eyeing their countenance suspiciously.

To her surprise, the twins didn’t even answer. They merely sat at the table, and sighed contentedly.

Nevertheless, they were there, and, intending to go home soon, Mrs Weasley took her leave of the Lovegoods. At the same time, Katie teased the twins playfully, and they blushed even more before recovering their usual playful mood and teasing her back.

“Alright, you lot.” Mrs Weasley said, addressing her red-haired children. “Time to go home.”

They all said their goodbyes to each other, before going home for the final days of the summer vacation.

It was only when he arrived in Newcastle that Harry remembered about his idea of checking about the Longbottoms. That thought brought another one, and he looked at Tracey intently.

After several seconds, she noticed and looked back at him. “What? Do I have a spot on my nose?” she asked with humour. When he didn’t answer immediately, she got to her feet and sat beside him, still looking him in the eye. “What is it, Harry?”

“How old are we, Tracey?”

“What do you mean? We’re 13, of course. Why?”

He suddenly grew shy about it. “What do you think about Neville?”

She looked at him in wonder. “What about him, Harry? Is it about his parents?”

“No! It’s about...” he trailed off. Despite having shared some tender moments with Tracey, they hadn’t spoken about their feelings yet, and he was quite nervous.

“Is this about Katie?” Tracey suddenly asked. Then, in a smaller voice, she added “About us?”

He nodded. “Are we ready for this?”

She took a deep breath. "To answer your first question, I think you and I are more mature than most 13-years old. We both witnessed things..." she trailed off for a few seconds, before speaking again. "Especially you. I find it good for Neville to have built enough self-confidence to ask anyone out, but you don't need to "ask me out", Harry Potter. I'm with you already. Unless..." she stopped again, unsure of how to continue.

"I'm with you as well, Tracey." he answered. "I was just wondering about the name of the feelings we have for each other. Is it... love?"

He was looking at her, and, suddenly, his mental walls lifted, dragging her inside his mind towards his recollections of their moments together. When the tour was finished, she found herself back in her seat, her cheeks wet with tears.

"I'm sorry." he said, giving her a tissue. "I didn't think-"

She raised a hand to his face, stopping him. "It's alright." she said. "I just wasn't prepared for it, that's all. I think we can."

"Can what?"

"Call it love." she replied, blushing profusely. After several seconds, she continued. "We can wait for some time before saying it aloud, if you want. After all, we spent a good part of the last year together as friends. And we certainly don't want the outside world to know that some teacher wooed one of his teenaged students into his bed." she finished, her blush reaching a Weasley level.

"I... I wouldn't..." he stuttered, blushing as well, before being interrupted by her hand again.

"Don't say it. My words went beyond my thoughts, there." she said. "Let's keep our pace, please?"

He nodded, and opened his arms to her. The two of them hugged for a long time that evening, not like lovers yet, but definitely not like mere friends.

Harry's thoughts were millions of miles away from Neville's parents, now. But he didn't know that he'd see them sooner than expected.
Ministry of Magic, Sunday, noon...

The doors to the Wizengamot meeting room were tightly shut, and spelled to be impervious to any form of spying. In the large antechamber, there were numerous wizards and witches waiting quite anxiously for them to open. Most of them were journalists, and the others were the two candidates and their retinues. Scrimgeour was impassive, quite the opposite of Fudge, who was pacing restlessly, like the nervous wreck he was. His thoughts barely concealed behind meagre Occlumency walls, the portly man was wondering if he had paid the Wizengamot members enough to ensure his re-election.

Inside the sealed room, the discussions had started slowly, with the usual swearing about each other's identity and the number of votes they had received. After this, however, things went from bad to worse quite rapidly.

"I don't understand how Dumbledore could have gotten so many votes!" a frizzy-haired witch screeched, standing and pointing at the Chief Warlock, all of this without giving the man his rightful title. "He must have cheated for this to be even possible!"

"Preposterous!" exclaimed a wizened old witch, her tone belying her age. "Even our Chief Warlock can't overcome the truth spells put in this room."

"How do you know, Griselda?" asked the first witch. "Would we know if he can overcome these?"

"Ladies, ladies." the subject of the conversation said, trying to appease them. "There is no need to get angry about this. If you wish, I can swear on my magic."

The first witch looked at him coldly for a few seconds, and nodded curtly. "You do that." she said, and sat down.

Dumbledore sighed, and spoke the words required of him.

Once the magic was settled, the first witch got to her feet again. "That doesn't prove anything! With the power he is supposed to have, he can counterfeit magical vows as well." she said, looking around for support. To her surprise, her vehement plea found no supportive ear, and even the ones who were openly against Dumbledore didn't seem interested by her speech.

"Everybody knows that you can't counterfeit magical vows." the wizened old witch said smugly, supported by a chorus of "Hear, hear."

"But... but..."

"I think it's enough." said the man who was sitting right next to her. He patted her arm and she sat with a huff. The dumpy man stood up in her place and stroked his moustache before speaking again. "However, this calls for the question as to how it is actually possible."

The chorus of question was quickly quieted as Dumbledore stood up as well. "If I may offer a reply: the majority of the voting public consists of muggleborn witches and wizards, some of them not even living in wizarding settlements." he said, raising their interest and numerous comments which he quieted by raising his hands. "You shall remember that, fifty years ago, and against my wishes, this body issued a recommendation to the Board of Governors of Hogwarts, which culminated in the removal of the course in Wizarding Politics from the curriculum."

"What's the point?" asked the man.

"Since the numerous muggleborn wizards and witches who passed the halls of Hogwarts missed that course, the only member of the Wizengamot they know is me. It has never occurred to us before, because these muggleborns have rarely participated in the elections."

“Why the change?” asked a tall and thin wizard from the other end of the room.

“ I’m sure you remember the recent attacks targeting the muggleborns.” Dumbledore finished, before sitting down. Nothing more had to be said, and the dumpy wizard grumbled in his moustache.

After a few seconds, he spoke up again. “They should be removed from the votes.”

“What do you mean?” asked Dumbledore.

“We are all pureblood here, and these disgusting muggleborns pretend to dictate our wishes?” the man asked, trying to rally others to his cause by speaking louder and moving his arms frantically. “Since they don’t live in wizarding places, they obviously don’t belong to our society, and their vote should be discarded.”

Dumbledore looked around, and sadly remarked that several people were agreeing with the man. These extreme ideas weren’t new in the wizarding society, but seeing them openly expressed in the Wizengamot was a first.

“What you are suggesting,” he began, raising his hands to draw the attention again, “is to remove the civil rights of some wizards and witches, just because they weren’t born from wizarding parents.”

“Don’t take that road with us, Dumbledore.” the man answered. “All of us here know where your loyalties lie. The fact is that, with this number of votes behind you, you have an unprecedented power over this body and that shall not be.” He then turned towards the rest of the members. “Dumbledore has led this body with an iron grip for too long already. I propose that we use this opportunity to change our Chief Warlock.”

Dumbledore was stunned speechless by the man’s gall. An iron grip? In the few seconds he took to react, he also remarked that,

judiciously placed in the crowd, several members were agreeing loudly, rousing the others to acceptance. His anger flared at the manoeuvre, and he resolved to use a trump card he had thought he could have kept for a later use. "How dare you!" he exclaimed, stilling the group. "How dare you question my loyalties, while yours are clearly not with us?"

With a bit of wandless magic, he lifted the man's sleeve, and a gasp echoed from several throats at the same time. Voldemort's Dark Mark was there, a blackened stain on the man's sallow skin.

No move was made for a few seconds, before the man grabbed his sleeve frantically, fighting Dumbledore's spell. "It's not my fault!" he exclaimed. "I was under the Imperius Curse."

"I'd like to see you swear on this." Dumbledore said with a severe stare.

The man blinked once. Then twice. Then he grabbed something in his pocket.

Several people reacted immediately, grabbing their wands, but the man had acted first.

He disappeared.

After their initial shock, the members of the Wizengamot looked at their Chief Warlock in concern.

Dumbledore had his wand out, and was lifting his sleeves, making them stick magically so that his arms were bared. He then addressed the group with a serious expression. "It's not the habit of this group to propose a new fashion, but I propose that we all do that. The time for half-truths is over, and we have an election to finish."

The members had their wands out and started to do so. A couple of them had different ideas, though.

"Avada Kedavra!"

Two beams of green light shot towards Dumbledore, but the old man had thought about it, and he conjured a slab of stone which intercepting the curses, exploding in a shower of gravel in the process. When the dust cleared, the two offenders were gone as well.

“Three...” Dumbledore mused. ‘That’s one more than I thought.’ he reflected. ‘And, to go through the wards here, they must have used Portkeys made by Voldemort himself, no less.’

One could wonder how members of the Wizengamot could be Marked by the Dark Lord, and why the Mark was still in such an obvious place. The Dark Mark is a spell, and even Voldemort would have to work on it for some time to change the Mark’s place. And members of the Wizengamot, elected by their peers, had never been checked for Dark Marks. On top of that, their ceremonial robes covered their arms quite completely. It was only through his numerous contacts that Dumbledore had been able to know about the identity of one of them, and the presence of a second one. As to why he hadn’t exposed them before: like he had done several times in the past, he wanted these people to redeem themselves. He had been quite violently opposed today, though, and it brought home the fact that the wizarding world was on the brink of war. He knew that Voldemort was alive, and that, by keeping a low profile for the moment, the Dark Lord was preparing something big.

Dumbledore shook himself out of his reverie when he noticed that everyone was ready, standing with their arms bared – clear of any Dark tattoo – and their wands in hand. “Thank you. Now that the threat is gone, we can revert to a more formal attire. These circumstances bring me to another subject, though. The Wizengamot is the supreme legal power in Britain, and it shall not be swayed by Death Eaters at all, nor shall it be corrupted. I propose that we all swear on this.” He stopped for a second and noticed the anxious expressions of a few members and filed their names in his mind for future use. “The vow shall be in the like of the following: I, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, solemnly swear on my magic that I will not be swayed by anyone or anything in my future decisions in the Wizengamot.”

While the members repeated the vow one after the other, Dumbledore noticed that the members he had remarked earlier were put at ease with the wording of the vow, although they were still wary. He suspected that whoever bribed them would be angry of not having the expected result.

They then proceeded to the vote proper. The Death Eaters gone, with the votes behind Dumbledore, it was no surprise that Fudge was not chosen to continue his disastrous work.

When the vote was done, the Wizengamot members trickled out of the room in an orderly fashion and Dumbledore announced the results. The reporters focused on Fudge's rage, and no one noticed that the Wizengamot was three members shorter than usual.

King's Cross Station, September 1st

The train ride to Hogwarts started as usual, except for one thing. It was a small thing, really, and no one noticed it. Most of the Slytherin students and several pureblood children in other Houses were quieter than normal. Quieter and nervous. If one had been looking at them, one could have seen them anxiously playing with trinkets that hung from their neck, wrists, or fingers. One would have also remarked that they all took the time to walk to the last carriages instead of grabbing the first available ones.

The train pulled out of the station, before starting the long trip northwards.

After an hour, in her compartment, Tracey started to get nervous as well. It wasn't for the same reasons, though. She knew that Harry intended to make the trip with her, given that he had promised to be there. But he wasn't.

Tracey also knew that he was with the teachers at the moment, preparing the Welcoming Feast. He had told her about the Time Turner, of course, and that's how he could have been in the train with her, while staying at Hogwarts at the same time. He had told her that he'd turn back the time after the teachers' meeting so that he'd be there. But he wasn't.

Thinking that he was playing a prank to her, or waiting for an appropriate moment to appear, she sat back and read one of her favourite books, waiting for him. After all, if she tried to use her pendant to contact him mentally, chances were that she'd startle him in the middle of the teachers' meeting, and she didn't want that.

However, after visiting her friends twice and finishing her book, she had exhausted all the possible outlets for her nervousness, and she decided to contact him anyways. It was already three in the afternoon, and she was starting to get really upset.

She closed her eyes, and, grasping her sapphire pendant, concentrated on him. 'Harry?'

Several seconds later, his answer came. 'Yes, sweetheart?' It was clear, but delayed by the probable distance.

'Err... I don't know how to say it, but... You are not there. I have just spent two hours reading The Keep again, waiting for you.' she sent.

The seconds trickled by, and she wondered if he had received her message. She was ready to cast it again when he answered. 'I was in the teachers' meeting and just left, with the pretext of going to the loo. What do you mean?'

'Just that you... Hey! What is...? Harry! Help! We're-'

The advantage of mental discussion was that emotions and pictures could be sent as well, and Harry reeled in the Hogwarts loo, under the feeling of despair and the images of train wreckage Tracey had just sent. He couldn't lose any time asking for confirmation.

Using his still-active connection to Hogwarts' consciousness, Cassie, he Apparated out and hurled himself through the gaseous reality. If some rules of magic could have been broken, he'd have gone even faster. He followed the tracks until he found the place where Tracey had called from, halfway from London. It was only seconds after her call, but he realized that there ought to be casualties as soon as he saw the train. Or what was left of it. The red engine was reduced to a

mass of metal, along with the three first carriages. The two carriages afterwards were a blazing inferno, and numerous Death Eaters were casting curse after curse at the remaining carriages – except for the last four, which were in a surprisingly good shape.

Harry knew he had to act fast, and what's the best way to act fast but go back in time?

He took a few seconds to think, and reflected that he would have to time his return accurately. He knew he couldn't prevent the wreckage, because, then, Tracey wouldn't call him and it would create a paradox – as his past self wouldn't have been warned. He knew he should appear between Tracey's initial call and her cry for help. Arriving later could mean that she died in the wreckage, and arriving before would make the call she made reach his future self, probably creating a paradox again. Unless...

He smiled, and silently thanked her for having tested their communication abilities with several instances of himself around. Looking at the scene of desolation a last time, he turned the silver hourglass a full turn backwards.

After the customary twirl in the space-time, he arrived at the same place, luckily devoid of train or supposedly dead students. Hurling himself southwards, he made up a plan and transformed into Jerry Homest. Once done, he brought his elaborate mask up, Galenus' magical cloak following suit. Thanks to the other tests he had done with Tracey, he also knew how to quickly change both of them as he needed, and he was soon looking like a member of the Corps of Royal Marines, the official green beret planted on his head. The only difference with the usual equipment of the Special Forces was Merlin's wand, firmly held in his right hand.

His plan now firmly established, he used the wand to transfigure one of his hairs into a trunk, which he then spelled heavily: the inside was enlarged until it was as large as the Great Hall, and cushioning charms were applied on the six sides; the outside was shrunk until it was resembling a portable trapdoor, just large enough to let a body pass through.

Since he now knew how to Apparate in a moving vehicle, Harry did exactly that, and used the wand to Stun the students in the first compartment of the train in one go. This done, he Levitated them inside his new container, their stuff following suit. His plan was to repeat this on each compartment, working his way to the train's queue. What he didn't know, though, was that the train was monitored by the Ministry, and that the spikes of magic caused by his spells would reach some people's ears soon.

Harry continued to Stun and to move the students, compartment after compartment, sometimes dispelling the locking charms in the way. Behind two of these closed doors, he found older students in positions that made him blush, but he Stunned them nonetheless and continued. He didn't forget to search the bathrooms, and his magical glasses assured him that he wasn't missing anyone – since he had been to the teachers' meeting as Henry Evans, he was wearing the glasses already.

He took care, however, to leave Tracey's carriage alone, sealing it and keeping it for the end. He knew two reasons for which his action wouldn't cause a paradox: one, she was reading, and, two, there had been no resistance when he threw the locking spell. Once almost everyone was unconscious and stowed away – including the woman with the food trolley, but leaving the driver out for the moment – he Apparated out and returned to Hogwarts. He looked at his watch and noticed that he had only a few minutes before Tracey's call. He took advantage of this time to enlarge and transfigure his portable trapdoor and magically stick it on the wall of the old classroom eleven – the portal towards the inter-house rooms. With a last look at his watch, he Apparated out and headed further to the north, knowing that Tracey's call would reach the closest version of him. While he was waiting there, he stowed Merlin's wand away and took the crossbow out, choosing an assortment of orange, purple, and polka-dotted black ammunition clips – explosives, smoke screens, and normal bolts with indentations causing them to scream while flying. The clips had a Velcro band on their backs, and it was easy to stick them to his garb. This done, and the weapon hung on his belt, he focused on his watch and waited.

When he was sure that Tracey's call had been made, he Apparated to the train again and took hold of the driver first, Stunning him with his ring and charming the train's pedal to stick to its "forward" position. Noticing the Death Eaters through the windshield, he quickly Apparated out and went to Tracey. Releasing the driver in the gaseous reality, he had just enough time to make his hands tangible to grab her and her possessions before the train brutally stopped, wrecking itself on whatever blocking spell the dark wizards had cast on the track.

Tracey, startled by her abduction, had opened her eyes and released the crystal, stopping her communication with his past self, but she quickly realized that only her boyfriend was able to grab people in the gaseous reality and, noticing the wreckage around her, she mentally thanked him.

His quick reply was to be silent, and, for a full minute, they didn't move, except for Harry to shrink her stuff and stowing it in her pockets. Harry's past self arrived then, and, after assessing the situation, he left to the past. Only then Harry did signal to Tracey that they could move out.

Harry's initial plan had been to leave quickly, letting the Death Eaters torture the empty carcass in vain. However, as he was starting to move to the north, he noticed people arriving from there. Tangible people in the gaseous reality, although they were immobile while travelling: people Apparating in. And he knew them: they were members of the Order of the Phoenix.

He swore and, knowing that Tracey could get herself out of the situation by Apparating out, he went back to help the Order against the Death Eaters, assuming Henry Evans' appearance again.

From his altitude of a few feet, in the gaseous reality, Harry first noticed that the arriving members of the Order of the Phoenix were under heavy fire. The area was slightly forested and they had arrived on the right-side of the track, not far from the largest group of Death Eaters. His next observation was that the heavy fire was coming from two fronts: left and right from the train track. While he was looking around, he had also taken the crossbow out and had equipped an

orange clip. He returned his hand and the associated weapon to tangibility and fired the five bolts at the five largest groups of Death Eaters. He barely perceived the five resulting explosions as he was disengaging the used clip and equipping a purple one instead. He didn't have time to repeat his previous shooting, though, as someone – friend? foe? – had put up an anti-Apparation field. Thanking his good fortune for not being stuck in some matter, he Apparated out and, while gravity was calling him back to earth, he shot several bolts around the Order's position. He landed in a crouch near Mad-Eye Moody and missed being shot by a hair's breadth. The paranoid Auror recognized him just in time to move his wand away at the last second. Harry felt the spell fly by and thanked the Fates again. That spell would have been painful.

"What are you doing, lad?" the man asked, before registering the smoke clouds around them. "Your work?"

"Aye." Harry answered absently, chucking a dotted black clip on the crossbow.

Moody threw a couple of spells and the two of them heard a couple of pained cries, showing that the man's aim wasn't perturbed by the smoke – of course, his magical eye was of a great help there. "Good job." he said, before throwing spells again. And it was quite true. The smoke was far enough from the Order for them to have clear shots at the Death Eaters coming through, and the Death Eaters' aim was now completely off.

"We have to get to the train!" a voice behind Harry yelled – Dumbledore.

"No!" he shouted back, but just loud enough so that only the Order would hear it. "The students are safe!"

He felt the incomprehension around him and threw screaming bolts at the Death Eaters, noticing with a grim satisfaction that he scored unerringly each time – of course, with glasses the equivalent of Moody's eye, it was no surprise again.

The screaming ammunition seemed to startle everyone, making the Death Eaters hesitate. Harry felt someone arriving behind him, and he whirled back and had the mixed pleasure of seeing the Headmaster looking at the business end of his crossbow.

“The students are safe?” Dumbledore asked, ducking under a red beam coming from the enemies.

Harry shot the Death Eater with his last screaming bolt, distractedly thinking that the Death Eaters must be either tired, new recruits, or both, to use Stunners instead of their usual Cruciatus or Killing curses – those two took quite a large bit of power to cast.

“Yes.” he answered. “Jerry learnt of the attack an hour ago, and he moved them to Hogwarts already. He told me just before I left. Protego.” he finished, noticing with pleasure that his shield reflected a Stunner back to its caster.

Dumbledore nodded, relieved about the students’ fate and impressed by the apparently wandless spell. “Time to retreat, then.” he said, before falling back to warn the others.

“Do you know how many of them there is?” Moody asked after downing another enemy.

“No, I-”

A scream interrupted Harry and he paled. It was a girl’s scream.

Tracey.

Harry jumped to his feet and ran towards the scream. “Stop.” he murmured. “Stop. Stop!”

The remains of his control over time were frail at best, but his anguish at losing his girlfriend made him pour a great deal of magic into it and he jumped over – and ran under – frozen beams of magic, to get towards the scream. When he reached his goal, he noticed two things: he was in the middle of a group of Death Eaters, and one of

them was holding Tracey, fangs bared and ready to "drink". Still in an accelerated time frame, Harry ran to the man, shouting several curses as he went. They impacted the white-haired man, who started to fall from the onslaught – and two broken legs. Upon reaching him, Harry was finally able to snatch the girl from his arms.

At that moment, he was a bit relieved to be in control of the situation again, and his power over time slipped. Time flew forward again, but the situation was not in control. As soon as Harry appeared there, seemingly from nowhere, the Death Eaters threw their curses at the pair. Without any other option, Harry Apparated out.

He was still stuck in the gaseous reality, but, at least, the spells didn't reach them.

‘What were you thinking?’ he demanded. ‘I told you to leave!’

‘You didn’t!’ came the equally harsh reply. ‘I came to help you.’

‘Well, it doesn’t seem to be that way.’

‘Fine!’ she sent, with the mental equivalent of a huff.

After several seconds, Harry addressed her again. ‘Sorry. It’s true, I didn’t tell you to leave, I just supposed you would.’

‘How could I?’ she immediately answered, although it was said more softly, and Harry felt her relief as well. ‘I didn’t know what had happened. One second, I’m in the train, and the next, you leave me to fend by myself. I’m sorry to have caused problems, though.’ she amended. ‘Did I?’

‘Did you what?’ he enquired.

‘Did I cause problems?’ she asked in a small voice.

‘Well... I don’t know. Where is the train driver I left you with?’

‘Oh, he’s still Stunned, over that ridge... Oh! They found him!’

‘I’ll go check. Are you fine, right now? No need to breathe, or anything?’

‘I didn’t realize, but... no, no need.’

‘Alright. Stay here, now.’

The whole conversation hadn’t lasted more than a few seconds, and the Death Eaters were just reacting at what had happened.

Lucius Malfoy was furious. He was furious to have found an empty train. He had sniffed a virgin’s scent and had caught the young girl, but that demon of a man had battered him with spells before catching her and disappearing despite the anti-Apparation field. In anger, Malfoy had snapped at his unit, and they had started scouting the surroundings, leaving him in the clearing to lick his wounds. As he was healing his legs, using a magic he didn’t remember learning – that was from his first prey – he didn’t see an arm appearing out of thin air behind him, nor did he hear the incantation. The Stunning spell took him by surprise and he toppled over.

Harry appeared again and ran to the ridge behind which the train driver was hidden, and where two Death Eaters had gone. When he arrived there, he ducked their spells and quickly Stunned them. He was slowly standing up when a mental warning came from Tracey.

‘Duck! The vampire’s awake again.’

He hadn’t waited the end of the conversation to obey, and a green beam shot over his head. He jumped behind the ridge, barely avoiding a barrage of spells like no one ever subjected him to, and wondering if vampires had a heightened resistance to Stunning spells.

As he didn’t want to raise his head unnecessarily, he opened his awareness to his surroundings to search for the man. Once his enemy was spotted, Harry poked the wand through the earth at the ridge top, aiming it correctly before casting a strong explosion hex. The barrage of spells stopped, and Harry left it at that for the moment,

sliding further behind the ridge, towards the train driver. Like he had done with Tracey, he Apparated out with the man, leaving him in the gaseous reality before becoming tangible again. The man wasn't hurt, and Harry vowed to get him back eventually.

'He's up again!' he suddenly received, and wondered about how he was going to dispose of the man. With the memories he had to teach his own course, he checked to see how to get rid of such a dark creatures, and he found one of the possible ways: stab the heart. Concentrating for a second, he Summoned his katana and quickly applied the reflecting shield on it, like he had done before – one is never too careful.

He also strengthened his skin, but didn't have much time to do so as the man appeared above the ridge already. Harry lunged at him in a forward thrust, expecting a supernatural resistance, but nothing of the sort happened. For a couple seconds, the man stood there, looking stupidly at the blade protruding from his chest, before toppling over, blood spewing from his chest as the weapon was released. Under Harry's surprised gaze, the man seemed to shrink and his hair became blond all of a sudden. On top of recognizing Malfoy, Harry was surprised to see the faint image of a woman exiting the man's body like a ghost, before giving it a few kicks and then dissolving into thin air.

At the same moment, Harry sensed someone else approaching, and he readied his sword. However, while he was expecting another Death Eater to approach slowly, Harry wasn't expecting a reddish blurry mass literally bowling him over. Fortunately, he still had fast reflexes and avoided his throat from being bitten off, while slicing the creature's furry skin across the chest. The beast howled in rage and pain, but it didn't prevent it from charging again. Harry didn't even have time to stand up again as the half-man half-tiger beast pounced on him, pushing him back on the ground. Nor did he have time to ponder at the creature's resilience: the wound on its chest had healed already.

Even with a slightly hardened skin, having several hundreds of pounds sitting on one's chest is quite difficult already. Having that weight jumping there and actively trying to destroy you at the same

time, that is really painful. Despite his lack of oxygen, Harry managed to throw a couple of spells to the creature, throwing it away, but this was only enraging it further, and it pounced again. His back flat against the ground, Harry started to feel dizzy and, confused, he tried to attack the beast again, tentatively waving his short blade toward it. This gave the inattentive beast a slight wound on the cheeks and, moving away from the blade, it leapt at Harry again. After a second of uneasiness, Harry felt his world explode in pain as the beast snapped its powerful jaws around his upper left arm. The sharp teeth had had difficulties cutting the skin, but, that done, they went through muscles as through butter, snapping the bone as if it was made of brittle glass.

Harry tried to scream in pain, but he couldn't even raise his chest to do so. He tried to attack again, but his oxygen-deprived organism wasn't complying anymore. When dark spots began to appear in his visual field, he knew that his world was coming to an end, and, oblivious to the shouts around the battlefield, he fell into a pain-filled unconsciousness with the picture of a self-satisfied beast etched in his retinas. A beast gnawing at a meat-covered bone. A beast curiously resembling the swordsman he had killed in the battle of Windsor. In a last mental surge, he learnt the name of his aggressor.

Rodolphus Lestranger.

To be continued in next chapter: The Longest Day...

It arrives... Can you feel it?
The final battle, was it?
Not quite yet, I'll just say that
You'll like it written like that.

Chapter 27 – The Longest Day
posted January 8th, 2006

Pain.

Hustle and bustle. Shouts.

Pain, again. It seems such a constant in my life...

My life... is it finished, already?

A spell. It seems that I'm able to breathe, now.

I'm still in too much pain to envisage doing it right now.

“Albus! He's not breathing!”

“This will send you both to St Mungo. Portus.”

Movements. A pull at my navel. Much movement.

Other voices. Pain again, but receding. Enough to wake my mind.

I draw a large gulp of air.

My name is Harry James Potter, and I'm not dead.

Contrarily to what I thought.

They say the mind can live for a few minutes without blood. It seems that it's true.

Now that my mind is awake, I unplug the pain connection.

Better, now. At least, I can think coherently. Why did I put it back in its place, already?

Ah, yes. Pain can be useful for the body. It's like an alarm system, you know?

Pain helps you realize that your skin is being damaged because you are holding a hot cauldron with your bare hands.

Pain is the body's answer to intensive work with too low reserves of nutrients. Cramps, anyone?

Foregoing pain can lead to serious damage to one's body. That's why I plugged it back.

I'm beginning to wonder if I should make a list. Like a shopping list.

"Things to do before engaging in battle"

First: unplug the pain thingamajig.

I'll have to make a list of things to do after a battle, too, in order not to forget about plugging it back.

After a healthy dose of healing in between, of course. I don't want the cumulative pain slamming into me at once.

Second thing to do, before battle – not in the middle of it – augment skin toughness to its maximum.

Darn. I remember, now.

Where's my left arm?

The voices around me seem perturbed about something called vital statistics.

"How can he be alive? Numerous ribs... The blood loss in itself..."

"And the pain! I think he's in shock: he doesn't move. Have you seen the wound? His arm must have been ripped."

Thank you, but I'm right here, you know? By the way, that did hurt like hell!

They are perturbed, I gather.

Remembering the comment about the blood loss, I mentally snort.

I'm a metamorphmagus, you know? I can regenerate my blood easily.

Which reminds me... I concentrate on my body and start to do that.

Phew... that was close.

They don't seem to realize that their blood replenishing potions aren't quite effective on me.

Thinking about blood, I'm suddenly extremely happy to be in St Mungo, and not in a muggle hospital.

It's not that I'm that knowledgeable about Wizarding hospitals, but I know that they don't have the habit of piercing your skin every now and then – most of their healing procedures involve spells and potions. I wouldn't have liked them examining my blood and finding everything about my powers. Besides, that would be Blood Magic, and it's outlawed... or so I think. I should definitely ask Hermione.

Not having my skin pierced also means that they deal with pain with spells and potions as well. Thankfully, they don't know anything about morphine shots or other intravenous painkillers. Injected in my bloodstream, these had the unwelcome side effect of scrambling my mind. Thinking about that... I should find something to defend against them, too. I wouldn't want Voldemort and his shock troops to throw that sort of shit at me.

My thoughts err for a bit, before returning to my arm... sort of. I distinctly remember seeing a Polyjuiced wizard regrowing a missing limb, and I hope I can do that with my Metamorphmagus powers. I'll deal with that later.

Where was I thinking before? Ah, yes.

Third thing to do before a battle: make sure Tracey is safe. And my other friends, too. Or, if they aren't, I'll have to make sure that they have what it takes for them to fight properly. Or to flee.

Checklist of questions for Hermione: what is Apparation and why normal wizards can't Apparate like me?

Four: get more weapons ready; store more clips for the crossbow.

By the way, I should see with Flitwick about the charms they did for the inter-house study room.

Never-ending clips could be handy.

"Things to buy soon" - a jacket with plenty of enlarged pockets, too. Or a belt. Anything.

That locket is cool, but it's starting to get cramped in it. Like my mind.

My mind...

I walk out of my consciousness building and look around.

And up.

You know, I dug in the depth of my mind to hide from the outside world, but I could store things in the air. Could I?

Sure.

For now, though, I bring my gaze to the blob of recent memories.

It's not a slab. These are permanent memories. This is not.

The blob will solidify, eventually. It takes a couple of nights for regular memories to do so. These ones contain the fight, and I want to see what happened after that ruddy thing bit me.

Sweet Merlin in tutu!

It bit me!

I start to panic.

What exactly was that creature?

“What’s happening with his heart?”

The voices are shouting, bringing me to the present.

I calm myself, and the voices calm as well. Seems like my heart had skipped a bit or three with the realization that I’ve been bitten.

Memories, memories... seems that the cavalry had arrived and Banished the monster off my chest.

It took Dumbledore and Moody to keep it at bay while McGonagall Levitated my battered form.

They didn’t get my arm, though. Gone are the rings of the Order and of the Venetian Knighthood.

Ah, well... these are unusable, now. And Dumbledore and Leonardo can make me replacements.

At least, I didn’t go there with Ravenclaw’s ring. That would have been a loss.

Since I can cast spells with my own ring, I don’t need the Founder’s ring as much as before. It’s stowed away, now. Especially when I’m around Dumbledore. The old man noticing a Founder’s heirloom was a can of worms I didn’t want to open.

Wait! I’m looking at the memories of the fight, and I caught a movement from the corner of my eyes. Let’s rewind... zoom on it...

Darn! The "vampire" was moving. I thought I stabbed Malfoy in the heart!

With the benefit of hindsight, I realize that it mustn't have been a vampire.

Not a real one, that is. Despite his appearance and apparent immortality. And despite what he intended to do to Tracey.

I shudder.

After all, there was sunlight all around. And, consequently, no full moon.

Lestrane wasn't a werewolf as well.

Speaking of which... I focus on my body to check for discrepancies.

Bloody hell! You know, the infectious agent that werewolves transmit?

It's back!

I look around in my mind, but there's no sign of the tell-tale angry mist.

Remembering my protections, I jump at their top to inspect the outskirts of my mind.

There it is. Good. Stay there, angry mist. Damn, it's really angry. As if it was the full moon already.

I check. Having Remus in the "family" makes it quicker – even though he is healed, now.

Damn! The full moon is tonight!

Frantically, I check the memories, only to find the one relative to the "werewolf" transformation outside my fortifications.

For the moment, it's not threatening, but I can't work on my mind with this hanging around.

I'll have to find a way to get rid of it. But not tonight.

“We should get some blood for analyses.”

The voices are here again. They speak about tests. Seems that they aren't illegal, after all. Not all of them, that is. Whatever the case, I don't want them to run their tests on me.

Let's wake up.

I check my body again, this time to see if I can wake up. I spent a good deal of time in my mind already.

After a last glance around, I shake my consciousness and wake up.

My left arm is in pain. Or rather, whatever is left of it. But it's just an information, now. I don't feel it.

I open my eyes and look around. They don't notice.

I sit up. They do notice.

Shouts of surprise. Worried questions.

I answer the best I can.

I'm fine.

I'm always fine.

I will be, anyways.

I'm a bit short in my reserve of magic, but that will fill with time.

Dumbledore barges in. Must be that mediwitch who ran out when I sat up.

He's worried to see me in that state, but I smile, reassuring him about my tenancy at Hogwarts.

He smiles, and wishes me a prompt healing.

Now that he's gone, I swing my legs to the side. I have to go to the loo. For real, this time.

The Healers try to prevent me from doing so.

My condition seems to unnerve them. Understandable. But I won't pee assisted if I can prevent it.

I smile at the one responsible there. It's an old woman. Tight grey bun. Stern expression. A relative to McGonagall?

I ask her to cast all the detection spells she can think of, and, although surprised by the request, she complies with it.

I concentrate on what her spells do while she casts them. Between my Legilimency and my Metamorphmagus powers, it's easy to discover what she searches for and adapt my body to satisfy her.

Thinking of my powers sometimes brings up questions about why I'm so powerful. I'm not that powerful, you know. Well, yes, I'm that powerful, but that's not too much, I think. With Apparation, Legilimency, and the receding power I have over Time, these two are my only extra powers. Well, if you forget that I mastered all this before entering Hogwarts, that is. The rest? I'm sure there are Muggle martial artists doing fine with their body and their weapons.

The stern Healer steps back, utterly confused. I explain that I have always healed quickly. Must be a mutant thing. I suppress the urge to tell her exactly that. She wouldn't understand. Muggle comics? Nah...

As she doesn't seem to understand that I don't need them anymore, I repeat my "I'm fine" litany, while pressing on her mind to accept it. I push just a wee bit, and she yields. Good. I don't need the apparatus around me anymore, nor do I need the charms keeping me on the bed and monitoring me. I'm sure other patients have a greater need of them right now.

I check my equipment. Ring... check. Locket and Time Turner... missing. What?

In a controlled voice, I ask about it, and she points at a platter near the bed. The missing trinkets are there, as are my glasses. Good. I was a tad afraid, there.

After putting them back on and testing my legs, I rush to the loo and... well, you know.

Before going back to the room, I check my appearance in the bathroom mirror. Pale. Clothes in tatters. Not a surprise, there. I concentrate on my magical mantle, and create a proper set of clothes. That will do for now. I adjust my blood levels once more, and my face takes its rosy colour again.

Once back in the room, I ask to leave, and, stunned by my healthy appearance, the stern Healer complies again, bringing me the release form. After all, despite a missing arm, I'm fine, so they have no reason to keep me there, right?

They want to keep me to re-grow the arm. They say it takes only a short time to do so. Six months. I'd rather not be kept there and inactive for six month. Thank you very much, but... no.

I sign the form quickly, and I'm sure they missed the fact that I did it with my ring, not my wand.

Nevertheless, it's signed, and I leave the room.

St Mungo is quite a large building. Well, not on the outside, but, you know, with magic...

I walk towards the Apparation point, crossing several wards on the way. Ward 47. Ward 48. Ward 49. Ward 50.

Stop.

I retrace my steps back to ward 49. The Janus Thickey Ward. I heard a couple of mediwitches talking about the Longbottoms.

Neville's parents.

I realize that Fate had something to do about my presence here tonight. Well... in for a Knut...

I enter the ward, and find several beds lined on the walls, with a playing area in a corner. Yes, that's it. A playing area.

With a shudder, I realize that the victims of long-term spell effects treated – or merely kept – here are sometimes "only" victim of mind illnesses. And, despite the existence of Legilimency, I'm not sure that wizards fare better than muggles in their treatments. At least, they don't saddle them on electric chairs, here.

I shook my thoughts and go from bed to bed until I find those of Frank and Alice Longbottom. Two emaciated adults look at the ceiling with vacant eyes. I shudder again.

I grab one of the chairs there, and sit next to Frank. It's difficult to find similarities with Neville in there, but I'll do what I can to put the man back on his feet.

It isn't difficult to enter the man's mind. But what I see there is difficult to stomach. I don't know if you saw images of the destruction modern bombs can do, but it's the same here. The slabs of memories lie around, their connections dead, and the consciousness building has fallen into pieces.

I notice a younger version of Frank Longbottom in the ruins. Looks like his consciousness is still alive, but it is useless since it has no memory to reason upon, and no connection to the body for him to move around.

It would be dangerous to have him around while I rebuild the wrecked memories, so I bind him.

The first order of business is his consciousness building. And the adjoining magic silo. For a couple of hours, I work on them, strengthening the structures, filling the holes, and reconnecting the body signals. After putting the man's consciousness back in the now-sturdy building, I focus on the memories. They are completely

jumbled, though, and I don't think I can spend more than an hour looking through them. There's something I gather, though.

Alice and Frank have been tortured into insanity, 12 years ago. And the torturers were no other than the Lestrangle. Good. I have one more reason to go after them, now. The two remaining ones, I mean.

After reconnecting the memory blocks, I untie the man's consciousness and let him search through them. I know that sorting one's memories was easier than having anyone else doing it. Not wanting the first meeting with Neville to be a shock, I add a few recent memories of the boy before leaving the man's mind.

I cast a look around. It's still night time, and the shutters are still closed. However, my watch tells me that there won't be many hours before sunrise, and I know I'll have to go back in time to treat Alice. As I'm thinking about it, I notice that Frank starts to move, producing incoherent sounds. Although it's good news for him, I don't want the nurses to barge in just now, so I cast a full body bind charm on him. I then hide under the woman's bed and turn the silver hourglass four times – I know that I couldn't have done so in the gaseous reality, because the stillness caused by the permanent anti-Apparation field would have prevented me.

After the customary sensation of still displacement, I hear the voices of the two mediwitches. Just as they leave, I leave from under the bed, cast a full body bind on Alice, and Apparate out, before entering her mind. That way, my past self won't see me or notice her moving.

Once I'm finished with her, she is, like her husband, in a process of self-recovery. It seemed it took just as long as her husband, as I notice my past self hiding under the bed for the trip back in time.

Before leaving the room, I decided to help the others too. One after the other, I enter their mind, only to find that only a few of them could be cured. Since I visit their mind, I also know about their loyalties, and I leave the couple of splinched Death Eaters as they are.

The sun is starting to show through the shutters, and I'm knackered. However, I know that a certain Jerry Homest should be at Hogwarts

for the attack debriefing... yesterday. I thus decide to go back in time again. A full 24 hours. It's time to see if I can regrow this arm. And I definitely need a good "night" of rest.

Hogwarts, evening of September 1st

Dumbledore returned to his office, only to find several concerned faces looking back at him.

"Is he well?" McGonagall asked, voicing the concern of several members.

Dumbledore nodded. "Strangely, yes. I don't know many people able to wake up after such a deb- such a wound." he quickly amended. Moody had a wooden leg, and the man wouldn't like the term "debilitating" at all.

"The lad is good, that I can say." the aforementioned Alastor Moody commented. "By the count of the bodies, he was able to kill or disable more than thirty opponents with his strange weapon. And the smoke clouds saved our lives. He's the only one seriously injured, though, and there were plenty of opposition. Speaking of opposition, it's just a wonder that the train was empty when they attacked."

"Speaking of which," Dumbledore interjected, looking at McGonagall, "where are the students?"

The stern woman shook her head, not knowing the answer. Following the young man's words, they had checked the castle for the usual meeting places, but they hadn't found anyone. Dumbledore's eyes widened, and he tried to grasp his pendant discreetly. At the same moment, though, someone knocked at the door and entered the office, seemingly unconcerned by the wands aimed at him.

"Ah. Jerry." Dumbledore said guardedly. He had tried to find the old man a couple of times, but, for whatever reason, Jerry Homest was as elusive as a certain teenager currently residing in Brazil. Dumbledore stopped his thoughts when he noticed the man's frown.

“Are the students well?” he asked, his arms waving at the Order members to lower their wands.

“They are.” Harry answered curtly. “If you want to see them, I’ll lead you there.”

“What happened?” McGonagall enquired.

Harry looked at her, and his attitude mollified somewhat. “If you’ll follow, I’ll tell that story as we head there.”

And he did just that. He explained about how he Stunned the students – and about the few couples caught in a compromising situation; those he had awakened before the others. He told them about the magicked container he had stuck to the wall of classroom eleven. When Flitwick asked where he had bought such a thing, Harry couldn’t find any appropriate shop name and he answered truthfully.

“I made it.”

“And you told us it’s a room as large as the Great Hall? How wonderful!” the Charms expert piped, jumping up and down.

Harry remembered about his clips and the charms in the inter-house study rooms, and decided to talk to Flitwick about them soon.

A short time later, they arrived in the appropriate place, and Jerry unlocked the room, only to find a group of students in the middle of the room, the upperclassmen around them, their wands aimed at them. And several students lying on the floor.

“What happened, there?” Dumbledore demanded, the very picture of authority.

Harry mentally contacted Tracey – whom he had brought there just after the battle ended, or a tad bit earlier for him – and she told him that a couple of Slytherins had let pass that they knew about the train attack. They didn’t seem to have known about the extent of damage it

would cause, though. She also told him that a few of them were fidgeting with trinkets and that's how they had been able to round up all those who knew.

After a quick chat with the Head Boy and Girl, Dumbledore had reached the same conclusion. "It's a sad way of starting a new school year," he said, eyeing the wayward group with sadness in his eyes. Sadness, and determination. "I hereby remove any reward, prefect status, or advantages from you. Furthermore, and that's for each of you, until you manage to gain a hundred points, you will be on probation. If you break any school rule, you will be expelled."

He turned toward the other students, the Prefects and upperclassmen still protecting the younger ones. "Thank you for managing this crisis. You will report these students to me or to any Head of House if they break rules. Don't take this responsibility lightly, though. Your reports ought to be truthful, and these students shouldn't be provoked into breaking rules."

They nodded as one, and Dumbledore led the group through the doors to the Great Hall, where the Sorting began. Harry had left, but his mind link to Tracey allowed him to follow what was happening. He noticed that, after the Sorting itself, Dumbledore's start-of-term notices included a praise of their new Defence teacher about how he dealt with the attack. To his dismay – he had wanted to keep that particular information hidden – the Headmaster explained his probable lateness with the fact that he had lost an arm in the fight.

Harry recovered his wits quickly, though, and decided that he should spite the old man by making some grand entrance right now. After cancelling the connection with Tracey and morphing back into Henry Evans, it took almost an hour to shrink his left arm into nothingness, so he turned time again before pushing the Great Hall's doors.

They slammed open and he walked to the Head table in the eerie silence that resulted, his mantle billowing behind him in a manner not unlike Snape's. It took a great deal of will not to burst into laughter when he perceived Tracey's mental snort.

He didn't want Dumbledore to guess about his regeneration too soon, so, when he arrived in front of him, he indicated the place where the Time Turner was resting on his chest and turned his finger once. The old man nodded, his worried expression turning into an amused one, although tinged with sadness when he glanced at Harry's nonexistent arm. While Harry was walking around the table towards the place that had just appeared for him, the Headmaster continued his speech.

"Students, this is Henry Evans, the new Defence teacher I just told you about. There are other additions to the staff – or, shall I say, replacements. Professor Kettleburn has decided to take a well-deserved retirement to spend some quality time with his remaining limbs." he said, and waited for the resulting laughter to subside before continuing. "On top of his current activities of Gamekeeper and Keeper of the Keys and the Grounds, Professor Hagrid will replace him for the course of Care of Magical Creature." Dumbledore stopped there, allowing the students to politely applaud their new teacher. Hagrid, who had stood up from his enlarged chair, was beaming at the praise.

"The last change to the staff, and this one is reflected on the curriculum, is about Potion. From now on, it will be replaced by the larger field of Alchemy. Our new Professor, who hasn't arrived yet, is a Master Alchemist himself, and his name shouldn't be unknown to some of our upperclassmen. He is Nicholas Flamel."

"What?" a voice asked, quickly followed by a crashing sound.

Harry had been moving to sit, concentrating on using only one hand to move the chair – something he wasn't used to do yet – and the name of the Alchemy teacher disrupted this. He had crashed into his chair, sending it tumbling backwards.

So much for a "grand entrance".

The younger students started to laugh uneasily, but calmed quickly when they noticed that the others weren't. In fact, the older students and several staff members – as well as most of the Ravenclaws –

were either looking at Dumbledore in wonder, or discussing between themselves.

McGonagall sent an apologetic look at a certain Defence teacher, who, beet-red, was busy standing up again, muttering about old codgers at the same time. A properly focused – and silent – Summoning charm later, the chair was in place and Harry was ready.

It was just in time as well, as the Headmaster was finished with his speech, and food appeared on the tables, quieting the students' discussions while they ate.

Hagrid, sitting next to Harry, noticed that his left arm was missing and he approached.

“Aye, Professor Evans. D'you need help with...?” he trailed off, looking at the thin slices of meat in Harry's plate.

“No, Professor Hagrid, thank you.” Harry answered. “Magic is of a great help already.”

Unseen by anyone, Harry had used his ring to cast a couple of properly-focused Cutting Curses to slice his meat appropriately, and Hagrid could only nod. “Just say Hagrid, Professor. I'm not used to teh Professor thing.”

“Neither do I.” Harry replied with a warm smile. “I'm Henry. Nice to meet you.”

While the feast was progressing, Harry and Hagrid engaged in a light conversation, ending with an offer from the large man for Harry to visit him someday soon. After Harry nodded, he caught sight of Dumbledore walking towards him.

“Good evening, Professor Evans. Can we meet in my office?” the old man asked.

“Of course, Headmaster.”

Once there, Dumbledore sat behind his large desk and produced a bag of lemon sherbets from his drawers. He offered it to Harry, who refused. At the same time, a red-faced Minerva McGonagall entered the office.

“Albus!” she exclaimed. “You could have told us about Master Flamel’s presence among us! And you could have waited before leaving the Feast, too!”

“Of course.” the older man answered in his usual benign way. “But that wouldn’t have been fun, now, would it?”

McGonagall shook her head in disbelief. Trust the man to display his madness even to the staff.

Dumbledore noticed this, and he smiled. “You remember Horace? Well, he didn’t want to come, invoking his usual reasons.”

She snorted, surprising Harry. McGonagall, snorting? “I wonder who he’d wants around him this time. There are not enough celebrities.”

“You know who, Minerva.”

McGonagall looked at him with a surprised gaze, which quickly faded into an understanding one.

Harry was quite lost, though. “You-Know-Who? Voldemort?”

That made the two older persons smile at the quid pro quo. “No, of course not.” Dumbledore answered with a chuckle. “I was speaking about Harry Potter.” he added, before turning thoughtful – missing Harry’s quickly suppressed jolt of surprise. “Although I’m sure that Horace met Voldemort at some point.”

“Huh? Is that Horace a Death Eater? And why does he want Harry Potter here?” Harry asked. He didn’t want to probe the Headmaster’s mind, and was a bit lost at the conversation, something he wasn’t used to.

“Horace Slughorn was Potion Professor and Head of the Slytherin House for a long time, before he retired in 1981, to be replaced by Severus Snape-”

“-who left us to return to Voldemort.” said McGonagall, her lips in a taut line.

The twinkle in Dumbledore’s eyes diminished in intensity, but he didn’t scold or correct his Deputy Headmistress. “Horace wanted Harry because he has the habit of taking young people under his wing... to "help them build the connections towards a successful life", he says.”

“More like him living successfully thanks to the numerous gifts these former students give him.” McGonagall interjected again. “I’ve been said that he asks for these gifts, and-”

Dumbledore coughed, interrupting the stern woman’s rant. “Anyways, I don’t think this interests our young colleague. After all, it is not Horace who’ll be there, but Master Flamel. There was simply no valid candidate among the four others who tried.”

McGonagall stifled a snort. “Of course. The old Potion Masters are employed by Voldemort or dead thanks to him, and there are so few young ones, thanks to Severus’ teaching methods. Seriously, Albus, you could have-”

“I know, Minerva. I know.” Dumbledore said, throwing a quick glance at Harry before looking at her meaningfully. It didn’t take a Master Arithmancer to understand the polite request for silence.

“Alright, then.” the Transfiguration teacher said, before taking her leave of the two men.

“ You wanted to see me, Headmaster?” Harry asked after McGonagall had left.

“Yes, Henry. By the way, as I told you in August, please call me Albus when we’re in private.”

“Very well, Albus. What did you want to see me about?”

“Several things. Alastor Moody recovered your weapon from the battlefield.” Dumbledore said, and he took Harry’s crossbow from behind the desk and handed it to him.

“Thank you.” Harry answered, taking the weapon and sticking its hook to his belt. “I guess there are other things you want to discuss.”

“Yes. First is the battle itself. You acted admirably and helped us quite well. In fact, it’s mainly thanks to you that no casualty had to be declared on our side. Now, why did you have to rush in the middle of Death Eaters? And how did you do that?”

“What do you mean by how?”

“You almost disappeared from the place. I said almost, because I remember seeing a blur going from where you were standing towards the enemy ranks.”

Harry reflected about it – taking care not to display his true thoughts to the Headmaster. “I heard a shout, and I thought Jerry missed some student in the train. When I arrived, I noticed that it wasn’t true. They must have faked it somehow. And, concerning the speed, I have been trained in several techniques, some of them magical but most of them muggle. *Mens sana in corpore sano*, they say. A healthy mind in a healthy body. The masters who taught me want to stay anonymous, though, and I intend to honour their wishes.” he finished. He couldn’t very well tell the old man about the experiment with the particle accelerator, now, could he?

Dumbledore nodded thoughtfully and Harry felt that the old man, while not believing him completely, was ready to give him the benefit of the doubt. Especially with... “I’m sorry we took so long to reach you.” Dumbledore said, nodding at Harry’s absent arm.

“It’s alright for the moment. I couldn’t stay at St Mungo for six months, could I?” Harry replied. “Especially now that Voldemort is active again.”

“Your return with us was a clever use of the Time Turner, I think. And I’m sure that, with it, we can find a way to heal your arm completely in less than six months. Perhaps, a few days’ stay in the hospital wing...”

“It would be great!” Harry exclaimed, trying to play his act accordingly. In fact, he didn’t want to impose anything on Madam Pomfrey, and his arm wasn’t causing any problem yet. His arm...

He looked up. “Did you recover my arm from the battlefield?”

“I’m sorry, Henry, but the beast took it away.”

“It wasn’t exactly a beast. Well... of course, it was. But it was Lestranger. Rodolphus Lestranger.”

Dumbledore looked at Harry with wide eyes. “Are you sure?”

“Positive. And Malfoy was with him.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Lestranger and Malfoy were quite... unusual. You saw Lestranger: that was the red beast. Malfoy was more powerful than before, of that I’m sure. He was also... completely white, before I disposed of him. Well, I thought I did, anyway, because I know I put my blade through his heart. However, I have indistinct memories of seeing him move around afterwards. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear he’s been turned into a vampire or something similar.”

“Hmmm...”

A thoughtful silence was brought down on the office. After a minute, a flash of fire illuminated the place as Fawkes appeared, a letter for Dumbledore in his claws.

When the red bird noticed Harry, it looked puzzled for a second, before turning amused. Harry wondered how he could make the difference between the bird's expressions but his thoughts got interrupted when Fawkes started to chirp happily. "Hello, young speaker."

Harry looked at the bird in surprise, and Dumbledore chuckled, mistakenly thinking that the young Professor was surprised at the bird's appearance.

"This is Fawkes, my familiar." he said, before turning thoughtful. "Although, at times, I think I am his familiar."

"The same words, again and again." Fawkes trilled, before leaping to his perch. "I know your quandary, young speaker." he continued, looking at Harry. "Don't think you'd be impolite if you just don't speak to me for now. As to how I know you, you can say that Leonardo has a bit of blood in common with me."

Harry looked at the bird with an expression bordering on awe. Again, confusing his expression for pure awe, Dumbledore chuckled. "He's a bit expressive, today. Feel free to greet him, if you want."

While Dumbledore focused on his missive, Harry stood up and approached the perch tentatively. "Good day to you, Fawkes."

"Thank you. Good day to you too." the phoenix answered, before looking at Harry in the eye again. "How interesting. Come fly with me, when you are able."

Harry almost blurted a "What do you mean?" before remembering Dumbledore's presence. He nodded and returned to his seat.

"Well..." Dumbledore started. "Alastor Moody planted trackers on the fleeing Death Eaters, and it seems he found a new track about Voldemort's location."

After a few seconds, Harry enquired "Where?"

“We don’t know yet, it’s just the beginning of the track. I’m sure we will have more information at the next meeting of the Order. Between now and then, we have work to do.”

Harry nodded, but stopped when he remembered something. “Sir! I mean... Albus. The Phoenix ring, it was on my... other arm. Was it conjured?”

“Yes. If I’m correct in my spellcasting, it should disintegrate soon.”

“Is it possible to do something with it? Using it as an anchor?”

The old man frowned. “What do you mean?”

Harry took a second to put his thoughts in order. “I was wondering if it was possible for me to disintegrate the whole arm. I don’t want any Dark Art or Necromancy spell cast on it.”

While Harry fidgeted nervously, the frowning Headmaster became thoughtful for a few seconds. Suddenly, his eyebrows shot up and he addressed Harry again. “I think it’s feasible, yes. Forgive me for not having thought about it. It confirms my hunch that you’ ll be a good Defence teacher, though.”

“How do we do it?”

“Do what?” Dumbledore asked amusedly, before returning to his serious state. “Sorry. I’ll conjure you another copy first.”

“A copy?”

“The Phoenix rings we use are duplicated from a master ring which is well-protected and they have the same spells because of that.”

“Are all conjured rings like that?”

“As I said, the Phoenix rings are mere copies. I found it easier to create ring by copying one, rather than casting all the spells again. Other types of rings might have other properties. Why the question?”

Harry wasn't ready to reveal anything about his Knighthood, and he waved the question away. “I was just wondering about the Phoenix rings, that's all.”

The two of them fell into silence, Dumbledore working on copying the master ring from its remote location – his Gringotts vault – while Harry reflected about making a trip to Venice. Soon. Or even earlier than that.

When the ring was finished, Dumbledore put it in his pocket before heading to his private quarters. When he came back with a heavy book, Harry was looking at him expectantly.

“If you had just put it on your hand, that would have destroyed the other one. There are several spell we can use to destroy the arm it is on.” the old man said, before looking at Harry in the eyes. “Are you really sure?”

“Yes. I don't see me breaking and entering Voldemort's fortress, wherever it is, and snatch it under their nose. Not right now, anyways. And I've the feeling that, if I wait, they would find ways to use my arm for detrimental purposes.”

“True, true.” Dumbledore answered, before opening the book at a seemingly random page. “Now, what do you think of this?”

Harry stood up and looked at the drawings explaining the effect of the spell. And he shuddered. “Seems like a Dark spell to me. With the blood connection and all...”

“It is. But we don't have much choice. And we have the advantage of not needing an additional sacrifice because we are already destroying the other ring.” Dumbledore answered grimly. Noticing Harry's hesitation, he spoke again. “I'm willing to cast it for you, if you want.”

“Why?”

“Because you lost your arm against Death Eaters. In the middle of a pitched battle with the Order of the Phoenix. Speaking of which, I ought to issue a recommendation to the Minister, too.”

“Recommendation? What for?”

“For a reward. I think a Medal for Courage would reward your actions appropriately, perhaps even an Order of Merlin.”

Harry looked uneasy for a second before taking his decision. “Thank you, Albus, but I don’t want it. Not yet, anyway.” he amended quickly. “I don’t want anything before Voldemort is finished. I have a personal account to settle with the monster. Too many friends...”

A few seconds of silence washed across the room, and Dumbledore understood that the young man in front of him did indeed have a story. “Care to elaborate?” he asked gently.

“Not today, Headmaster... I mean, Albus. Some other time, perhaps. I need to get rid of my arm, now.” he said, before smirking at the strange formulation. “That’s not quite how I wanted to say it.”

The older man let a chuckle escape. “I know, I know.” he said, before focusing on the dark spell. A few minutes later, Harry put the ring on his right hand, and he felt a small rush of power as the remaining magic in his limb was recuperated by his body.

“Thank you.” he whispered. “I don’t know what I’d have done if I would have faced myself in a fight.”

“That would be even worse for us, Henry.”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked, before imagining the scene. “Oh! Of course. You wouldn’t know which one to shoot and which one to protect.”

Dumbledore nodded, and a few seconds of silence passed by.

Harry then stood. "Thank you very much, Albus. I'll be on my way, then."

"Of course, Henry. After all, we have the first day of class to get ready to," he said, smiling.

"That's right. Thank you, for the crossbow, and all."

Outside the Headmaster's office, a boy was standing in front of a stone gargoyle, waiting. And waiting for someone wasn't something the Malfoys were used to. When Harry exited the office, he noticed the other boy and suppressed his first reaction of antipathy.

"What can I do for you?" he asked to the sneering boy.

Malfoy looked at him, his gaze impolitely resting on his left shoulder for longer than necessary. "I'd like to see the Headmaster, and I've not been given the password."

"Alright. Follow me, then," Harry said, trying to appear genial. After all, while he never experienced the inconvenience, he supposed that trying to get inside without the password could be unnerving, and he could give the blond boy a bit of leeway. But only a bit. He was a teacher, now, and Malfoy belonged to those put on probation. One step out of the line...

He led the boy upstairs, knocked, and entered. "Draco Malfoy is here, Headmaster," he said, and noticed that the man's expression became expectant. As if the old man, with all his experience, could learn something from the Malfoy heir. "He didn't have the password. And, for that matter, neither did I."

"Oh. Of course. Please enter, Mr Malfoy. The current password is Liquorice Wands. Thank you, Professor Evans."

Harry recognized a dismissal when he heard one, and it kindled his curiosity even more. What had Draco Malfoy to say that he wasn't privy to?

In thoughts, he headed to his quarters, passing before the Professors' room on his way. Hearing the tiny voice of Flitwick there, he stopped suddenly. 'No time like the present to learn that duplicating charm.' he thought. He was ready to enter the room when he heard the voice of the person Flitwick was discussing with. And he stopped dead in his tracks.

He knew that voice!

Of course, he knew it, but, now that he was hearing it without knowing who was speaking, something crystallized in his mind.

He pushed the door, and noticed that Flitwick was in deep conversation with professor Sinistra, who owned the voice of... Voldemort's spy in Hogwarts.

"Good evening, Henry." the Astronomy teacher said, acting every bit the kind woman.

"Evening." he answered guardedly.

"Are you alright? You seem a bit under the weather."

"Uh? Oh, yes, I'm fine." he replied, before thinking on how he could take advantage of the situation. "I'm just concerned about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, you know." he said, using the most polite hyphenated name for Voldemort and thus marking himself as a possible friend for her, despite his participation to the fight – after all, she had participated, too. Having caught her attention, he then continued. "And, with Dumbledore knowing his location and all..."

This earned him two squeaks, as Flitwick was following the conversation too. "He knows?" Sinistra asked.

"It seems so. He received a message from a spy he has in the Death Eaters ranks, and he now knows he's in Egypt."

Sinistra shot up suddenly, knowing that that particular information was true, and that the Dark Lord wouldn't be pleased at having one of Dumbledore's pawns in his ranks. "And... who's the spy?" she asked in the most conversational tone of voice that she could muster.

"I don't know." Harry answered, looking back at her. "But I have an idea."

She missed the allusion and fell silent for a while, leaving the two men start another discussion about Charms, before excusing herself. While she was walking towards her office briskly, Harry was readjusting Flitwick's recent memories slightly – no need for Dumbledore to know that he had blabbed this information. After all, it was entirely possible that Draco Malfoy was such a spy, after all. That would explain the look on the Headmaster's face. Harry excused himself as well and Apparated to Sinistra's office as soon as he was alone.

The witch had just entered, and she was digging through her trunk frantically.

Harry entered the woman's mind, and, to his disappointment, he found out that it was protected quite well. After spending several seconds levitating over the high walls, he finally entered her consciousness building, only to find out that she had finally fished out the thing she wanted: a small mirror.

Oblivious to Harry's presence, she started to hiss several sounds, and Harry threw several ropes and a gag at her consciousness to stop her before she could finish the sentence. He then looked at her in disbelief. Was she a Parselmouth? The hisses translated into "communication" in plain English, and, as he looked at her memories, finding that she wasn't actually a Parseltongue speaker, he amusedly thought that she must have spent quite a long time learning that particular set of hisses.

Harry didn't want Voldemort to find that his spy had been uncovered, but he couldn't leave her continue like that. There were several ways to do so.

He could let Dumbledore manage her. That was the simplest way, but he didn't know how to prove his case to the old man without giving a bit of information about his mental powers.

He could also reprogram her mind completely, making her forget she had been a spy, and, by keeping the mirror and acting like her, he'd be in control of what was said. However, he felt a little uneasy at reprogramming another's mind completely again, and he wasn't fond of importing a new personality either. Not counting the fact that he would have to seal his quarters each time he would have to contact anyone with it. And what if the mirror started to ring when he was occupied? After all, he was going to teach most of the day time, while she rested from her nightly courses – result of a schedule adapted to Astronomy.

The third possibility was for him to switch her mirror with another one, where he'd be at the other end. When he'd receive information, he'd judge whether he'd keep it or not. His mind settled on this choice, he Obliviated her slightly, removing only the latest memories. He then explored her memories some more, learning how to recognize the Death Eaters hand signals and how to respond to them – a system they had copied from the Russian secret services. Once he had obtained everything of interest concerning Voldemort and his followers, he made her lie in her couch and, after freeing her consciousness, he put her to sleep.

He then made a brief incursion in the tangible reality to levitate the mirror in a bag which he shrunk and pocketed. Thanks to her memories, he now knew that it was cursed to poison any person holding it except marked Death Eaters. This, in turn, meant that she had such a Mark, somehow. It raised the uncomfortable question of how her recruitment had been possible. Or her continued position. Or both. He resolved to speak to Albus about it.

The mirror secured, Harry returned to the Professors' rooms to see if Flitwick was available again. After all, he really was interested in a discussion about Charms.

The diminutive teacher was there, and they discussed about duplicating charms for a solid hour. It was interesting for both,

because, without mentioning his crossbow ammunitions, Harry made several parallels with real-life situations and with enlarging spells.

The conversation finished, Harry returned to his quarters. He was tired, but he also knew that there were things he should do before starting to teach. He instinctively knew that, starting the next day, his free time would lessen somewhat. That's why he decided to make a short trip to Another Road, the Swiss magical mall, and the one he knew best. He turned the time back to that particular morning and Apparated to his house in the Swiss town, where he took a few hours of rest to sleep his exhaustion off.

Harry had several wands: Merlin's, Flamel's, and the ones he bought as Harold and Kentaro. He also had two rings that could act as such: Ravenclaw's and his own katana. Thinking about it, he expected his other weapons to act as wands as well, although it wouldn't yield as much power. However, he couldn't very well use them in public. Using the rings would raise questions; his British wands were traced; Merlin's wand was too powerful; and Flamel's wand... well, with Flamel on the staff, he didn't want to raise attention by using the aged man's old wand. Therefore, his first stop was at Marig Klein's wand shop.

Once there, he asked the kind woman if the tracking spells could be removed from his holly wand – he wanted to leave those on Harold's as a possible mean to fool his pursuers. Unfortunately, despite being quite adept in anything related to wands, the woman couldn't undo them. He thus asked to buy another wand, retracting his magic inside him as she cast the detection spell. Rays of light appeared, linking him to several wands, and the woman selected the wands at the end of the three largest beams to present him. However, Harry didn't want to kill his students right away, and, needing a "harmless" wand, he asked to test the three faintest ones.

After testing the six wands, Harry chose a 14-inch long wand made of willow, and a foot-long wand made of mahogany. The first one was his "weak" wand, and the woman told him that its core was a unicorn hair, while the other contained the powdered fangs, some fur, and a heartstring of a Nundu. When he asked about the beast, the woman explained that Nundus were gigantic leopard-like magical beasts

living in Africa. They were extremely dangerous, and the wand was appropriately powerful – although not as much as Merlin's, which was why Harry had wanted a new wand in the first place.

His second stop was the Pets and Supplies shop, where he bought an ordinary owl for his mail. It was a male owl of average size, and he named it Alfred. Just as he was going out, he noticed a very large glass cupboard full of mice. There were hundreds of them milling about, thousands even, perhaps, and he wondered about it aloud.

“People buy mice?”

“Of course.” the shopkeeper answered in his oily voice. “The stock of snakes is gone, and people need fresh meat for them. There are wizards powerful enough to conjure or transfigure food, but for most of my clientele, I propose these.”

Harry was a bit surprised, but he quickly thought about it, and understood about the necessities of a well-maintained food chain. It made him think about his own snakes – which he knew were well-fed thanks to the messages he got from his family. It also made him reflect about something. Despite the apparent cruelty of the thought, these mice were "expendable" creatures. After all, one could always transfigure a pebble into another mouse and back.

Since his awakening after having been bitten by Lestrage, he was thinking of ways to remove the angry mist from his mind. He needed to make a mental link and to "upload" it to the mind he was linked to. However, his problem was that he didn't want to do that to just anyone. He wouldn't do it to his friends, nor would he do that to complete strangers, because it would doom them to a monthly rage. Despite not transforming into werewolves, that would make them mindless killers nonetheless.

Thinking of expendable creatures made him reflect that he could perhaps transmit his werewolf mist to them. That would be a first: no one had tried Legilimency on a rodent before.

Shaking himself awake, Harry stored these thoughts to the side of his mind for the moment. He had things to do elsewhere first. After thanking the man, he exited the shop and released the owl, instructing it to wait for him at Hogwarts. He then headed for the bookshop, where he quickly found books related to creatures. One was about muggle common animals – he needed to know the anatomy of a creature to be able to transfigure anything into it. The second was about small semi-intelligent creatures, the kind of which were usable as familiars – once again, he chose a book which displayed the anatomy of those creatures. He thought that he could use that book to acquire himself such a magically-enhanced familiar, in case he actually couldn't reach the mind of a common animal. And he also bought a third book on dangerous creatures, past and present, muggle and magical. It was a comprehensive tome which listed animals like Nundus, among many other beasts.

As he was nearing the register to pay for his books, he noticed a small booklet resting atop the shelves, related to fighting. Curious about it, he grabbed it and leafed through it, before adding it to his books with a smile. It was a booklet of Charms related to muggle weaponry. It seems that some pureblood or another had scribbled expletives across several pages, but it was still legible and had interesting ideas, the first of which being to charm a ring to magically summon weapons from where they were stored and back. Much like his Samurai paraphernalia. The shopkeeper noticed the book and sighed.

“You found it!”

“What is it?” Harry asked. “You can't sell it?”

“Yes I can, except that it's in a deplorable state. It regularly ends up hidden in the shop by some "clever" people thinking they are above muggles. They can't steal or destroy it thanks to the protection charms, but they do what they can to vandalize it. Strangely, none of them thought of buying it so that they could burn it, or such nonsense.” He shivered, the mere idea of burning a book being sacrilegious in his mind.

Harry nodded, and put a few Galleons on the counter to pay for his purchase, and, a few Cleaning and Repairing charms later, the small book was as good as new.

His last stop in the magical area was Matthias' Miscellaneous Mysteries and Machines, a shop which gathered all sort of magical items and odd artefacts. Some were a real find, while others were completely broken. There were also items that the shop owner manufactured. As he had spent some leisure time around the magical mall before, Harry knew that some of these hand-made products were communication mirrors, and he intended to buy a pair of those. He also needed specific charms on them. On the one he would later transfigure to look like Sinistra's, he wanted the shopkeeper to apply Charms to blur the recipient's image and change his voice, and the other mirror was to be charmed to keep the messages, like a magical answering machine.

While the mirrors were being spelled, Harry spent a few minutes exploring the disordered shop for other interesting stuff. There was always something interesting in such a shop, but almost nothing immediately appealed to him. Things like a talking skull and a trunk Vanishing its content, he could do without for the moment. However, he found something quite amusing: it was a wizarding camera. When the shopkeeper brought his charmed mirrors, Harry asked about it and the man answered that the thing had only a sentimental value, and that he'd be glad to get rid of it for a Galleon.

Taking the camera, Harry felt a tingling coming from it, like when he was holding a wand. He decided to buy it, and he would later discover that, unbeknownst to the shopkeeper, the device contained a wand core – a salamander's eye, in fact. Despite this being, like with wands, something which made the camera unusable by numerous people, Harry's particular connection to magic would allow him to use it. In the following days, he would discover that the camera was using the user's magic to create the pictures, making the usual film obsolete. And, later on, he would also notice that the user's mental focus allowed the camera to take different kind of pictures: black and white or colour; moving or still; with sound or without. It was truly a great item, and the fact that its previous owner's name was on it didn't disparage it. Even if it was Eileen Prince.

Checking the time, Harry found out that the afternoon had started already, and he went back to his house nearby, where he fixed himself a solid lunch. Nothing fanciful, but replenishing all the same. It was around four in the afternoon when he allowed himself to go to Venice – he hadn't dared going there before three, as his past self hadn't lost his arm yet.

Once in Venice, Harry Apparated directly in the Doge's quarters. Leonardo was alone – Harry had checked before Apparating in – and he greeted Harry cordially. Harry then exposed the problem of his missing ring, and the man quickly understood. He seemed to concentrate for a long time, and a ring appeared in his hand again.

"There it goes, Odysseus." he said. "A brand new Knighthood ring."

"Thank you, Leonardo." Harry replied. "What about the other one?"

"I just made it crumble to dust. I gathered it was your intention?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"No problem. Now, about this arm..." the man said, trailing off as he observed Harry.

"What?"

"I did tell you that our society is based on appearances, didn't I?"

"Why, yes."

"There are people that have suffered likewise disabilities in the centuries before, and we have devised a mean to restore their appearance quickly, and their functions are slowly recovered over time, too. If you are interested, the shop where this is done is right next to Galenus'. Do you need directions?"

Harry shook his head and thanked the man profusely again, before taking his leave, promising to be there for the Knighthood meeting, a fortnight later.

A couple of minutes later, he entered the indicated shop and looked around in awe. On the shelves were numerous appendages in various shapes. A good half of them were metallic, while some imitated flesh and a small part were made of wood. Looking through the models, Harry noticed that the metallic ones were available in several coatings as well. Choosing among the available sets, he selected a silver-coated steel arm – steel for its durability, and silver... that was in case he'd come across Lestrage again; or another hostile werewolf-like creature.

Then, while the shopkeeper worked the necessary magic to resize the brand new appendage and to link it to the body – meaning that the nerves' endings were linked as well – Harry remembered Jorg's missing arm. When asking the shopkeeper about it, it appeared that it was possible to buy a limb, resize it, and connect it by yourself, but the shop wouldn't be held responsible. Harry chose a flesh-looking arm for his German friend, and got a booklet with information about the charms to use.

When his own arm was done, Harry went to the counter and noticed the man's disgruntled face. When enquiring about the price, he was told that it was free, but it seemed strange that items so complex could be given like that, and a quick snoop in the man's peripheral thoughts told him why: while enchanting his arm, the man had noticed his Knighthood ring. The man was reluctant, but he abided to the law. Harry knew, though, that the two arms represented a long time of work, and an equally large sum. Taking the two appendages like that would likely prevent the shop from flourishing, and, who knows, he could need it at some later time.

With these thoughts in mind, he settled for a full payment, telling the man that he hadn't intended for the ring to be noticed. Thinking that it was a test, the man resisted some more, until acceptance was found.

Following that, they relaxed somewhat, and discussed about what Leonardo had implied: the ability for him (and Jorg, too) to use their

new arms like their own – and the possibility of removing it as well. That last topic had surprised the shopkeeper, but he had confirmed to Harry that the arm could be removed at any time, without even hampering the arm's functionality: as soon as it was put back on, it worked as well as before being removed. Provided that it worked before, of course. There had even been cases where a removed limb continued to twitch after removal, but it was a rare phenomenon.

As he was leaving the prosthesis shop, intending to find a recess to Apparate out, Harry noticed a shop which was on the verge of closing for the night. It displayed clothes and accessories, and advertised something related to discreet storage. Reflecting that it was somehow related to the "keeping appearances" Leonardo told him, Harry went there. The young woman tending the shop started to grumble about late customers, before she noticed his ring. She then apologized profusely, until Harry stopped her. In his most polite voice, he asked for one of the items: a black belt with an ugly buckle. He wasn't buying it for the buckle, though. This he could transfigure later – he had several ideas, in fact. He was buying it because of the dozen pockets sewn into it. They were only slightly enlarged, allowing the wearer – and the wearer only – to store and retrieve money or other small items in a discreet fashion. Once again, Harry paid for the item before thanking the shopkeeper and leaving.

That evening, Harry was in his house in Geneva. The prosthesis crafter had said that he'd need a long time and a strong will to adapt to his arm, and Harry had both. Especially with a Time Turner and a large house. He decided to spend as much time as possible in said house, repeating the same day over and over, until he was accustomed to his new limb. To avoid seeing himself or anyone else, and to prevent temporal paradoxes, he decided to Apparate in another room each evening, silencing and locking the door's room each time. He didn't even leave the rooms, using Transfiguration to create his meals and to dispose of the remains.

The first day, he focused on getting rid of his werewolf side. After all, repeating the day (and night) of the full moon was a nonsense for a good-aligned werewolf. Thinking about it, Harry was thankful to be a strong Occlumens. Again. And he was also thankful for those people he had taken memories about Transfiguration from.

After unsuccessfully trying to mentally contact a transfigured mouse, Harry absorbed himself in the book about semi-intelligent creatures and decided to transfigure the mouse into a Bowtruckle. Once it was done, he tried again and found himself in a somewhat reduced version of a human mind. It couldn't hold much memories and the consciousness building was extremely reduced, but it would work, and Harry used his vacuum cleaner-like mental tool to transfer the mist from his mind to the one of the small creature. This done, he returned it to its original state of a quill.

The whole thing had been quite difficult, and he spent several minutes recovering, breathing deeply and idly wondering if the werewolf rage had actually disappeared. He repeated the Transfiguration process and returned to the Bowtruckle's "mind" only to find it clear. After transfiguring it back to its normal state, he took his book on dangerous creatures in his one good hand and sat back with a satisfied smile. At least, he wouldn't transform into an uncontrollable dangerous creature: he would be in control of his animal shape.

The idea brought his thoughts to a stop and he dropped the book in shock.

What had Remus said?

Closing his eyes, Harry remembered their last conversation about the Animagus transformation. Harry had had a potion to drink but that had provoked an allergic reaction, because he had pushed Fenrir's infectious agents back earlier. However, now that he had been bitten by Lestrage, the infectious agent was back in full force. And he was now relieved of the angry mist forcing a painful transformation with the full moon.

He now understood Fawkes' words. He will be an Animagus!

Harry smiled broadly, before throwing a glance at the book on the floor. He had aimed for information about the Nundu and the book had fallen open on the feline section. The end of the muggle section. The end of the extinct non-magical felines, to be exact. And the

animal looking back at him made him shudder. When he looked at the animal's name, though, his smile widened. He absently wished that he hadn't "killed" his Japanese persona, as it would have been the perfect combination.

The Smilodon: the Sabre-toothed tiger.

Its data sheet was impressive in itself: the Smilodon Fatalis, the largest of the subspecies, weighted as much as 800 lb with a height of 4 feet and fangs as long as 7 inches.

Harry closed his eyes and returned to his mind. The mist was gone, but... there! The memory relative to the werewolf transformation was still next to his mind's outer walls, now hovering aimlessly. He inspected it to check if there was anything untoward in it. After removing the personality changes, he was quite satisfied and pushed it in his mind, so that it could be linked to his active set of memories.

Then, after disconnecting the pain signals from his body – he didn't want to pass out just yet, and Sirius had hinted that the first transformations were painful – he returned to his body. He intended to do something about the prehistoric tiger, but he would first check if the transformation was successful. He drew a large gulp of air and activated the foreign memory. He felt something slowly changing inside him...

...and fell on the floor. It wasn't because of the pain – which was intense, he could tell that even though he didn't feel it. It was because he was now in a shape not suited for sitting in a chair.

He looked at his hands, and found legs, the right one dark grey and the left a clearer grey, much like the colour of steel, which reminded him of his false arm. He looked at the rest of his body, but all he found was a black fur, with a dark grey underbelly and legs. Crossing his eyes, he was looking at a snout not unlike the one he had seen in the memory. He was a wolf!

He looked around, searching for a mirror. When he remembered the full-size mirror in his bedroom, he went there slowly, tentatively trying his legs. After three steps, though, he found that some of the animal's

instincts had been copied with the memory, allowing him to move without having to learn how. However, his false arm wasn't functional yet and he limped to his bedroom instead of "walking".

In front of the mirror, he took a good look at himself before transforming back. And then, he noticed his clothes. They had disappeared when he had morphed in a wolf, but they were still there. In fact, his robe was black like the wolf's back, and his clothes under it had been the same dark grey the rest of the fur had been. On a hunch, he transfigured his robe into an electric blue jacket and morphed into a wolf again.

The process was still slow, despite seeming faster than the first time. Looking at the pain signals coming from his body as it was forced into the animal shape again, Harry idly noticed that they were lower than the first time – even if they were high enough to stun him if he had kept them connected. He smiled – although it was difficult to see, as he was in his wolf form. If the pain continued to lessen in the same way, he'd be able to change between shapes quickly and painlessly soon.

He then looked at himself again, and, true to his intuition, the wolf now had blue fur on its back. A strange sight indeed. Thinking about it, Harry suddenly wondered if the Venetian mask worked. 'No time like the present.' he thought, and, in his wolf shape, he activated his mask. Still looking at the mirror, he quickly found that it had indeed appeared... kind of. His fur was now completely white and short. Concentrating on putting some memories outside of his mental walls, he found that the "mask" adapted, his fur gaining different colours and brushes.

As he was working on his mask, another stray thought hit him: could he cast spells while in an animal shape? Could he use magic at all? One after the other, he tried his different magical abilities, and they seemed to work just fine.

Apparation went first, and was glad that he always had a mean to escape – he once again vowed to use it should he be in a delicate spot. He knew that his brand of Apparation was different from the others', but he hadn't realized yet the extent of these differences. One

of those was that he didn't need a wand to do so, which helped greatly when stuck in an animal shape.

His wandless magic worked very well, and casting spells "regularly" was possible too, although it was extremely difficult: not only was the casting ring embedded in his paw, it was also difficult to make the appropriate gestures with a wolf's paw. And his false arm wasn't helping, making him stumble the first two times he lifted his other arm, until he decided to "sit" to try again. Nevertheless, he continued to try and succeeded in casting a weak Summoning Charm. Over the next few days, he would continue to practice his transformation and his spellcasting, re-learning the most useful battle spells.

The house had eight free rooms, and Harry used each of them for a day. During his stay, he focused on making his false arm work and perfecting his skills relative to the Animagus transformation. After enjoying the wolf form, he successfully duplicated the memory of the werewolf transformation twice – stacking them atop each other to gain space on the ground of his mind – and had successfully modified them to be able, after eight days, to transform into an inconspicuous owl, and into... a fearsome sabre-toothed tiger.

Despite the fact that it was still the same day, Harry had seen several days pass by, and, feeling a little alone, he decided to spend one in Japan to meet his family. Waiting for his week-old self to exit the Pet shop, he entered and bought several dozen mice for his snakes, surprising the shopkeeper with the apparent quickness of his decision. This done, he found a remote corner and Apparated to Japan.

It was night time there, and he slept a few hours in his bedroom, before being awoken by the usual rustle of his family waking up. They were all pleasantly surprised to see him, and they spent the breakfast time discussing and catching up on news. Of course, despite the fact that his new arm worked quite well by now, it wasn't inconspicuous at all – being metallic and all – and he had to explain about the attack and his subsequent loss of arm. That raised the anxiety of his family, but he told them that he was fated to fight, and that he had actually won that battle. They sighed in unhappiness but, knowing that he wouldn't speak lightly of grave things like Destiny, they accepted his choices.

They became curious, though, when Harry took a paper-wrapped package from his enlarged bag and gave it to Jorg. The man wondered about it, but, prodded, he tore the paper and – surprise! – a whole new arm. After being shocked, refusing, arguing, crying, and hugging him, the man finally settled down and let Harry do the job. Surrounded by a watchful extended family, Harry did so, explaining the arm's properties along the way. Jorg being a muggle, though, Harry suspected that the fake arm would take a longer time to adapt to Jorg's nerves. Especially as it had been a few years between the man's problems and now.

A couple hours later, Jorg said that he was returning to his work. It was quite fortunate that he was, at the same time, returning from a few weeks of vacation, as he would have had difficulties explaining to his colleagues his prosthetic arm – since the arm wasn't functioning yet, the prosthesis hypothesis was a sound one. Nodding as he was thinking about this, Harry asked if the man could spare him a console for a chat with his electronic alter ego. Jorg agreed immediately, telling the boy that, as he was now responsible for several services, he had several computers in his office.

“Enough for three?” asked Harry. When he noticed Jorg's enquiring glance, Harry nodded towards James, who was looking at the two of them with an eager expression.

Jorg smiled and acquiesced, eliciting shouts of joy from the younger boy. James then disappeared in his room and came back with a strange device, which he called "portable brain". When Harry prodded him about it, he just admitted that it was only a hard disk in a removable drawer. “I have many things to download,” he explained, “and our link here is so slow! And Jorg doesn't want me to come with him, usually.”

“I did, once.” Jorg interrupted with a mock-severe glance. “Who downloaded a virus on my console, that day?”

James had the grace to blush, and he mumbled something that none of them caught – Harry restraining his mental powers around his

family. He asked about what a virus was, though, and the answer made him think about the possibilities in mind defence – again. Once they were ready, the two muggles used the Harry Express to appear near Jorg's office.

Once in said office, Harry whistled when he noticed the larger desk and the impressive computers sitting atop it. James did the same when he noticed the network equipment sitting beside them. A whole rack was full with network switches, with diodes blinking sporadically. "Looks like it's too early for everybody to be up and about." Jorg said absently when he noticed the network's lack of activity. "Go on, boys. However, as soon as the workers return, I'll lower your priority for network use. I don't want to lose my job because of two would-be bandwidth hijackers." he said seriously, but his eyes told them otherwise.

"We don't want it either." Harry answered nonetheless. "Thank you."

Jorg nodded, and, after setting the workstations appropriately – meaning that he had to install James' hard disk on one of them –, he left them to their own devices.

A couple of hours later, Harry was even more thankful for Jorg to have lent him a powerful computer. As it appeared, Copycat had snatched the first version of a graphical engine intended to befit a future computer game called Doom. He had installed it on Harry's computer, and Harry had had the surprise of finding himself almost face-to-face with himself. Of course, it wasn't himself at all, and he made good use of Jorg's scanner to give Copycat an idea of his current physical appearance. His electronic double used the pictures as texture on his model in the artificial 3D world and, as Jorg and James were looking, he made faces using Harry's pictures, making the three humans laugh.

Barely an hour later, Harry had finished discussing with Copycat. It was the other way around, in fact: his computerized version had felt the limiting effect of Harry's lower priority on the network as soon as people started working in the building, and he had taken his leave soon after. Not having anything else to do with the computer, Harry

excused himself and promised to fetch James around noon – Jorg stayed the whole day.

Back at the apartment, Harry noticed that it was empty, with only a note on the board: "gone shopping with the girls – Mum." As he had a couple hours to kill, he decided to feed the animals in his zoo, and found himself discussing with them for several minutes. They didn't have much to say, except the three he had dubbed as the Norns. In the time and space they had, they had reproduced three times – meaning that, three times, the youngest one of the lot separated itself in two, one half able to do so again and one unable, that latter half being what remained of the "older" snake.

Since, in Hogwarts, he had a larger bedroom with no one to share it with, Harry decided to take with him the three older snakes. As those three were quite talkative when prodded, he would have some creatures to talk with. After a moment of thought, and a quick look in the mythology encyclopaedia he had received for one of his previous birthdays, he named the three remaining snakes Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos – these were the name of the Moirae, the Greek equivalent of the Norns: Clotho was the one who spun the thread of life, Lachesis measured it, and Atropos cut it, ending that thread's life.

Harry spent another couple of hours practising his Animagus transformations, adding the common cat in the process. Since he was on the verge of mastering the Smilodon shape, it was quite easy: he mostly had to copy the memory and shrink the target creature's model, modifying a few things on the way. He briefly wondered if he could do the same with magical creatures, but pushed it to the side for the moment, instead choosing to improve his quickness in solidifying his skin while in animal shape.

After a cordial meal, Harry spent the remaining of the day unwinding with his cousins – they didn't have school that day –, enjoying the joyful banter of the younglings and participating as much as he could. It was only when the evening approached that he remembered that he hadn't seen Goken yet. After yet another wonderful meal, he took his leave and travelled through space and then time – absently noting the silver hourglass' unusual warmth – before finding himself in Goken's dojo, the previous evening.

The man was quite happy to see him. He immediately noticed the difference in Harry's arm, though, and asked about it. Harry briefly considered not answering his mentor, but he knew that the man was a fighter who could be considered a natural Occlumens. Therefore, he decided to tell him a bit more about his fight.

Goken didn't scold him about his recklessness or his forgetfulness. He didn't need to: Harry knew that he could have escaped through the gaseous reality; he had been taken by the battle and had forgotten to retreat when it was too rough, even for him. However, the man was frowning at Harry's now-bared metallic arm. "You told me you don't need it?"

"Yes. I can grow it back in a couple hours, perhaps even less."

"You keep this for illusion, then." Goken inferred, and Harry nodded. A wicked gleam came to Goken's eyes, and Harry grew uncomfortable. "Have you tried to grow your arm while keeping the other attached?" asked the man.

"Err... no. It's quite recent..." he trailed off. Even if he had told his mentor about the fight, he hadn't said anything about time travels. "I've been working on something else. Do you think I should?"

"I think that if you succeed, that would create a third arm, with which you could hold yet another weapon. You are trained in fighting with two blades, but, if you can use three, you'd have an advantage. Especially against a stronger opposition." Goken stopped there, and looked at Harry with a curious gaze. "What 'something else' have you been working on?"

Harry looked around. "Well... it's a recent development too. I found out that the beast that bit me has certain similarities with the werewolf we killed in Hokkaido, and-"

"What? You told me it was transmittable. Are you...?"

“Relax, it’s taken care of. I’m not dangerous.” Harry replied, placating the man’s worry. “Except if you’re my enemy.” he added as an afterthought.

“We’ll see.” the man deadpanned, before looking at him expectantly.

Harry straightened up and walked to the middle of the room. They were in one of the fighting rooms, and the students had already left for the night, leaving the building in an eerie silence. Harry concentrated like before, and he felt his arm start to grow. However, it was quickly stopped by the artificial appendage and he shrugged at Goken, who kept looking at him intently. An idea struck him then, and he tried to grow his arm starting under the artificial one, as if his arm was coming out of his armpit. It wasn’t the normal place for this kind of limb, and it was much more difficult than growing his arm at its usual place. It took him thirty minutes to make himself a second shoulder, and another thirty to complete the arm – with the shoulder in place, the rest flowed more easily. A brand new appendage was hanging there, but it wasn’t moving much.

“Must be your nerves’ connections.” Goken said. “Since your prosthesis seems to respond to normal arm movements, you have nothing to order your third arm yet.”

Harry distinctively felt that the man had something up his sleeve. “What can be done?” he asked.

“We can stimulate the nerves through pain. That’s how people with transplanted limbs learn to use them, usually.”

Harry nodded, knowing this information already but remembering that he hadn’t told Jorg about it.

Goken wasn’t finished, though. “I remember you telling me that you can be insensitive to pain, but you will have to feel that pain to determine where it arrives in your mind. This done, you’ll have to test sending signals to these nerves or others nearby.”

“Alright. Let’s do it.”

“Now?” asked Goken, clearly surprised.

Harry nodded. “It’s not everyday that someone crosses your threshold with three arms.”

The man smirked. “Actually, you didn’t cross the threshold. And it wasn’t with three arms. I distinctly remember you having two arms when you appeared from thin air.”

“Well, you know what I meant...” Harry said, before trailing off.

“Alright. I just need to fetch a knife, and I’ll be-”

Hearing the man’s need, Harry had concentrated, and he was now armed with a tanto, which handle he was presenting to his mentor. The man smiled and took the proffered dagger before sitting cross-legged on the floor, Harry following suit. Goken then took Harry’s third forearm in his hands, and he prodded it with the dagger, repeatedly. He didn’t say anything. He didn’t need to.

Harry had retreated in his mind, and he was surveying the connections to and from his consciousness building. He started to feel pain, and quickly found where it was coming from. He prodded at the place, and his arm started to move. He then explored the connection panels while ordering his other arms around, and found similarities between the nerves endings. Smirking, he activated his survival instincts using the connections to the third arm as main weapon.

“Hey!” yelled Goken, lying flat on his back.

“Sorry.” Harry answered. “I think I found it.”

“Guess you did.” the man replied grumpily, sitting up and rubbing his jaw where the mark of a fist was showing.

“I need to train, though. I need control. And, once done, I’ll do the same with a fourth.”

“Why not now?” Goken asked, his grumpiness forgotten.

Harry thought about it. Compared to the week "before", the previous day had been quite recreational, and he felt ready to try.

“Let’s see if I still have my nerves when I remove it.” he muttered, and, in twenty minutes, he shrunk his third arm until it had disappeared completely. He went to his mind for a brief glance at the nerves, and noticed that the ones controlling his eventual third arm were still there. Satisfied with that, he repeated his earlier feat of creating a third arm – which he succeeded in fifty minutes, a bit less than before – before continuing on a fourth. He wasn’t sure that more than that would be useful. An hour afterwards, it was starting to get really dark outside, and Goken had switched the room’s lights on. His brow sweaty, Harry finished his transformation and breathed heavily. While he recovered, he took his fourth arm with his third – it took him five tries to do so – while absently wondering at the endless possibilities this kind of transformation allowed. Since he also knew how to transform into an owl – even though it took him quite some time to do so – he could even grow wings!

After a few hours of work on his sensibility and manoeuvrability, adjusting muscles and bones in the way, Harry felt sore all over and decided to call it a day – or night. He thanked Goken for his help, and the man replied that he would be there anytime if he wanted to train more. With a twinkle in his eye, Harry asked his mentor if he was sure, and he confirmed. To Goken’s surprise, Harry then said that he’d be there each evening at the same hours, but that he had to keep silent about it. Goken agreed again, though, quite happy of sharing a part of his apprentice’s life again.

Harry finally took his leave and Apparated to his quarters at Hogwarts, where he paused, remembering something. He fished his set of communication mirrors out, and, after configuring them to use the appropriate Parseltongue word, he made a quick trip to Sinistra’s quarters to stow her mirror in her trunk.

Back in his place, he sat down on his bed, surveying the place where he had actually barely slept. 'If I have a future self living around, I'll need more space.' he thought, and decided to duplicate his bedroom, using enlargement charms and transfiguration to create the furniture and the separation wall – with no door: as the second bedroom was for a future self, he was going to Apparate into it, leaving anyone else none the wiser.

Happy of his progress so far, he lied down and was asleep in minutes, in the hope of having a good last night of rest before his first day as a teacher.

In Egypt, earlier the "same" evening (September 1st

Tom Marvolo Riddle, also known as "I am Lord Voldemort", was angry. Definitely, completely, utterly angry. Furious. Seething. You get the picture.

Thankfully, he was not exacting his anger at his followers, this time. The small numbers of his forces had finally registered in his serpentine head, and he didn't kill them for the pleasure anymore.

Judging by his rage, the slightest Cruciatus would have fried anyone's brain in seconds.

As it did to the muggles in front of him.

After killing 384 muggles in every ways he could think of, he finally calmed a bit, and his followers breathed a very discreet sigh of relief.

Voldemort looked at the pile of bloodied bodies in front of him and smirked. Even in his anger, he had applied another rule he had learnt some time ago: it's useless to have a secrecy charm on a location if you kill people around it repeatedly. The Dark Lord, with the assistance of his greasy-haired Potion Master, had devised a way of creating mindless zombies.

They were sufficient to vent one's anger, though.

They were, in fact, replicas of human being, with just the intelligence lacking. And instincts. Like self-preservation. It was a tad disturbing not to hear them cry, scream, shriek, and emit all those sounds that were symphony to the Dark Lord's ears. He'd have to check with Snape.

However, it was not the reason of the current meeting.

His followers had left to attack the Hogwarts Express, which wasn't protected, and which had only two adults on board, none of them capable of much magic. And, despite wrecking the whole train, there had been no casualty!

Not only that, but Dumbledore's little group of mismatched fighters had appeared, practically slicing the Death Eaters' numbers. The reports were even conflicting. Some said that Dumbledore appeared before the others to deliver high-powered explosion curses. Others said that it was the job of a demon that was moving so fast that it wasn't visible. And Malfoy and Lestrage, even with their heightened powers, had been hard-pressed to subdue a particularly strong fighter.

On the upside, Lestrage had brought that man's arm like a gory trophy. However, the creature Lestrage had become didn't want anyone near it. Voldemort thought about it for a second, his mind calmed by the mindless killing he had just experienced. He had the arm of a powerful fighter... Snape could do something about it.

He was thinking about this when a yelp of surprised pain came from his bestial lieutenant. Under the equally surprised gazes of Voldemort and his followers, the bleeding limb burst into blood-red flames and turned to ashes in just a second.

Voldemort had recognized one of the numerous Dark spells he knew. "So the muggle-loving fool plays with fire, now?" he hissed. "But he must have had an anchor, to do that! What could..." he trailed off, looking at his followers.

"Did any of you check that arm for rings?"

“I did, master.” Snape answered, bowing in the hope of avoiding a harsh punishment. “But I saw no ring.”

“You saw no ring? Fool! You should know that some rings are actually invisible.” the Dark Lord said, hinting at the Phoenix ring Snape had been wearing before – the Potion Master still had it, but, unbeknownst to everyone, Dumbledore had remotely removed most of the charms from it.

Snape bowed even lower, his greasy locks brushing the floor. “Rodolphus didn’t relinquish the thing for a manual examination, my lord.”

Voldemort looked at Lestrage in wonder. What did the potion do to the mind of his trusted lieutenant? What did it do exactly, in fact? And how was it possible for the same potion to kill a man, put another one in a coma, and make the last two a vampire and a werewolf-like monster? He voiced the questions, and Snape straightened a bit, ready to answer. But someone prevented him to.

Jugson ran into the room, two of his apprentices close behind. However, the two apprentices didn’t make it. Two unlikely visions shot towards the unfortunate young men: Rookwood and Dolohov. Jugson slammed the door shut and sealed it, before turning toward his master, breathing hard. He didn’t have time to explain his actions, though, as improbable sounds came from behind the closed doors, followed by two identical screams. Which promptly died out.

Most of the Death Eaters couldn’t decide what was scarier: the unworldly screams or the eerie silence. Those closest to the doorway took several steps back.

A good idea.

However, the heavy wooden doors didn’t explode as one could have expected. They burst in a strange black flame. In the span of a few seconds, the door was entirely consumed, and Voldemort and his Death Eaters noticed that the flames left nothing in their wake. Not even ashes.

And, behind the doorway, five figures appeared. Two were lying on the ground, their clothes barely hiding their skeletal body which was as still as a dead body could be – without a necromancer's intervention, that is. Two were standing over them: the blackened Rookwood and the one that could only be Dolohov, despite the fact that he had several things missing: his eyes, for instance; and several patches of skin, especially around the mouth. It was as if his head was now a skeleton's skull. The man's skin had also paled dramatically. For all intent and purpose, Antonin Dolohov had been dead for several days: he had no heartbeat and his skin had started developing an unhealthy greenish tinge.

And yet he was here, his whole appearance screaming one and only one thing: death.

The fifth was Malfoy. Tired of his constant pained moaning following his return, Voldemort had sent him to Jugson, in what was the hospital-like part of the temple. Unbeknownst to everybody, Malfoy had slipped his keeper's attention and had left the temple for quite some time, Apparating to the nearest village to find some virgins to feast on. And he was back, now, looking healthy, boisterous, and... white. Completely white. Once again, even his eyes were as white as a statue's.

Under the fearful gaze of the Death Eaters, and the calculating eyes of the Dark Lord – Voldemort just wasn't fearful, it wouldn't have been fitting – the three standing figures walked across the room, walking being the operative word: Malfoy marched forward, like a conqueror; Rookwood followed suit, his body gaunt and his expression hungry; and Dolohov glided behind him. Lestrangle joined them as they stopped in front of Voldemort, and the four of them kneeled.

"My lord." they intoned. "We are ready."

"Ready to conquer land in your name." Malfoy said in a commanding voice.

“Ready to bring war unto your enemies.” continued Lestrangle, expectation evident in his stance.

“Ready to starve your opponents.” Rookwood wheezed.

“Ready to ’ring death to then all.” Dolohov finished, his words clipped by his lack of lips.

None of them had spoken with the usual deference shown to the Dark Lord. It was more like a ritualistic intonation. After several seconds of shocked silence, Voldemort addressed them. “Just who do you think you are?”

“I am Conquest, my lord.” Malfoy affirmed in a proud voice. “I will expand your kingdom all over the world.”

“I am War, my lord.” Lestrangle stated with a grin. “I come with the conqueror, and I will bath in the blood of your enemies.”

“I am Famine, my lord.” Rookwood indicated, and everybody suddenly noticed his emaciated figure. “I come after War, and I bring hunger to those I visit.”

“And I an Death, ’y lord.” Dolohov finished. “I cone ahter War and Hanine.” He then tilted his head while looking at Voldemort – it was hard to say, really, since he lacked a couple of eyes – and said “I see your death, too.”

The Dark Lord had been looking at the four with a thoughtful glance, but that last comment infuriated him. Even when he was still a student, he didn’t like people speaking about his death. It was a rule of the Death Eaters from the start, then: no one was to speak of his demise; ever. With a swish of his massive tail, he slammed Dolohov’s frail body against the nearby wall. It made a sickening crunching sound, and the man’s body slid to the ground afterwards. Some of the Death Eaters shuddered in fright.

The Dark Lord’s anger was somewhat abated by the swift execution, and he then turned towards Snape. “Just what was in that potion?”

Snape fell to his knees. "My lord, although it seems twisted, it is the result we wanted from the potion."

"Explain!" the large snake hissed.

"The recipe comes from an alchemist's cave we discovered in a Greek island. His speciality was hallucinogen Potions, but this one was clearly different. In his memoirs, he said he made it by mistake, and he also indicated that it gave him four fearsome allies against his enemies of that time. I think we have our allies, now."

However, Snape didn't say that his potion had one slight difference with the original. The original recipe included some Kirin's blood, and he hadn't known what the creature was, initially. Not a wonder, since the recipe was 1925 years old. Snape had made some research, and the closest creature he found, with respect to the blood properties, was a unicorn. When he had added the expensive unicorn blood in the potion, it had acquired the appropriate colour, and he had continued the brewing as indicated by the recipe. He didn't know that it would cause some bizarre effects in the future.

As he indicated, Snape knew that Patmos, the Alchemist who had devised the potion, had made it by mistake. Like any potion recipe, its creation was thoroughly documented, though. Patmos had also written that he had wanted to make just another hallucinogen potion. However, because Patmos had embellished his recounting, Snape didn't know that the man, when he had noticed the final aspect of the potion – odourless and clear like water – had dumped it in his horses' trough. It had caused quite a stir in the area, something the muggles couldn't miss.

Voldemort turned toward the three standing figures, who obviously waited for his instructions, and he smiled. He would have to plan something to test their exact power, first, but his battle plans against Dumbledore were brightening suddenly. "Go find a chamber to rest," he said. "You will be summoned when necessary. And bring this carcass with you," he said, pointing behind him, towards the wall where he had smashed Dolohov.

“Dat won’t ’e necessary.” a voice said, and he whirled around. Dolohov was standing again, and he walked towards his three "friends" before turning his empty eye sockets towards Voldemort. “As I said, I an Death.”

With this parting comment, the four left the place under the stunned gazes of the numerous humans and one monster.

“Severus.” Voldemort called. “Brew another batch. I need to test this.”

Snape bowed, and the Dark Lord dismissed his followers before leaving the room with a thoughtful frown.

Well... as much of a thoughtful frown as can be managed by a snake’s head.

Hogwarts, the next morning...

‘Are you alright?’ the girl’s voice asked in his head.

Harry smiled. Trust Tracey to feel anxious about him. ‘I’m alright.’ he sent back. ‘Just didn’t feel ready to face the school right now, or I’d have been unable to eat.’

‘You took a breakfast in your quarters, at least, right?’

‘Yes, I did. I’ll see you at lunch.’

‘Alright, then. Good luck!’ she finished with fondness.

He smiled again, and walked out of his quarters towards the Defence classrooms. The few students he saw in the corridors threw him curious glances, but they didn’t linger, being almost late for their first course themselves. Harry waited out of his classroom for the last students to arrive, and he entered just as the bell rang.

The students, who were sitting at their desks, jumped to their feet when he closed the door. Harry reflected that it was a habit they had

gotten from Remus and Sirius, who made them run a few laps before each practical lesson – and, as most of them were practical...

“Sit down.” he said, and they obeyed, surprising Harry.

While walking towards his desk, he thought about it. He had a power over them, now. What would he do with it? He knew he wouldn't abuse it, but there were some things he wanted them to realize.

He smiled internally. “Stand up.” he ordered, and they obeyed, although a few of them started to look at each other uneasily.

Harry sat on the edge of his desk and took the list of students out of his pocket.

He hadn't learnt all the faces of his students, but he knew how many there were, and a brief glance through the group of fifth-year Gryffindor and Slytherin students told him that two were missing. However, for that particular group, he didn't have to call the roll to know who was missing.

Two redheads.

He sighed, and remembered that he hadn't told the twins about his new persona, yet. They were surely doing their best to appear as troublemakers as possible on his first day. Still using his right arm – his left was hidden under a cape – he pocketed the list.

“Sit down.”

The class obeyed again. Harry concentrated on his link with Cassie, and learnt that the twins were behind the door, actually, listening raptly through some device stuck in their ear. He smiled. Were they intending to enter just when he'd call the roll?

“Misters Weasley, you will be in detention with me at five this afternoon.” he said, surprising the whole class. “Now, enter and take your seat.”

The students were even more surprised when the infamous twins actually entered the class, looking surprised and ashamed at being caught. As soon as they sat, though, Harry continued his little test.

“Stand up.”

Almost all of them obeyed, the twins included. There was only one student still sitting.

“Why didn’t you stand, Mr Jordan?” Harry asked Lee.

The teen looked uneasy but he mustered his Gryffindor courage and his usual wit to answer. “I take advantage of my right to stay immobile.”

“The school rules don’t include that sort of right, Mr Jordan.” Harry said sternly, before breaking into a huge smile. “Excellent! Five points to Gryffindor for growing a backbone. I’m sure that our local troublemakers would have done so as well, were they not trying their best to appear nonchalant before.” he said, waving his arm in the twins’ direction.

That confused the students, and whispers started all around the class.

“Were you going to obey me all day?” Harry asked, looking at the whole class and earning him a few more confused glances. “What if I ordered you to jump from the roof?”

That caused the class to grow silent for a few seconds, and Harry smiled warmly.

“Test’s over, you can sit, now.” Harry said, and he was not surprised to see several students still upright, the twins included. “What are you doing?” he asked them.

“Well, we didn’t want to continue like this.” Fred said.

George, as usual, continued his twin’s line of thoughts. “You’ll just order us to stand anyways.”

Harry frowned at them, before nodding. "Alright. But there's a difference, though, and I hoped you would understand. Earlier, I ordered you to do strange things – yes, sitting down and standing up like that was weird. Right now, I told you that the test was over and that you could sit. Do you really want to spend the rest of the period standing? That ought to be difficult should you want to take notes, you know?" he finished, smirking, and the four students still up – the Weasley twins and two unnamed Slytherins – blushed a bit and sat down.

"Now, the order of jumping from the roof was stupid, yes. Why?"

The twins looked at each other, but someone else reacted first. "We would die!" exclaimed Angelina Johnson, before blushing. "Sir." she added.

"That's because you think you would, whereas simpler orders like "stand up" are so inconspicuous that you think there's no danger, right?"

The class nodded along, although they weren't seeing where that was going.

"However, the one who tells you to jump from the roof might have knowledge of an imminent explosion and put Cushioning Charms below, while the one ordering you to stand might do so to shield himself from an incoming curse. And that's why you should examine the orders given to you before obeying."

"Are you telling us to disobey, sir?" asked the twin redheads in remarkable unison.

Harry smirked. "Exactly not. I'm telling you to use your judgement when obeying an order. But there are exceptions, especially when you are in a hurry, and even more so when you don't have all the answers at hand."

“How can we tell, sir?” Kenneth Towler asked. “I mean... if we are in a hurry and two persons give us contradictory orders, who will we trust?”

“I guess that it could depend on the situation, but it all boils down to one thing: Respect. The only people who can give you orders are people who have earned your respect. And this is done by respecting you as well. As persons.”

“But... you’re a teacher!” exclaimed Wendy Fawcett. “I mean... shouldn’t we have automatic respect for you?” she finished, blushing.

“You are right, of course. After all, the first measure of respect is the one you give to everybody. You just don’t go on a rampage out there, killing everybody and destroying everything. You don’t go out there, either, to belittle or mock everyone, regardless of age, gender, or any distinction of any kind. Everyone deserves that initial measure of respect.” Harry paused and looked at the class. “But, as for the meaning of your question... don’t take everything for granted. When you are students, you have an additional measure of respect for your teachers, because it’s the teacher’s job to teach you something. But the teacher has to reinforce that by respecting you as well.”

Harry paused for a few seconds before continuing. “I hope that the faculty earned that from you.” he said casually, noticing the varied reactions his sentence caused: several students nodded, while others winced. Unsurprisingly, the ones wincing were mostly Gryffindors, and Harry had no difficulty guessing the name of the former Potion teacher they were thinking of.

He cleared his throat to get their attention and continued. “Don’t forget that this situation is valid for the two sides. One of the rules of this classroom is punctuality: either you are here on time, or you will find the door locked. If you don’t respect me by being here on time, don’t expect me to respect you by accepting you in the class. Understood?”

The class acquiesced, and Harry nodded back. He knew that, with his workload, he would need some extra time to manage several classes

at the same time. Dumbledore had helped by creating a second Defence classroom, and the easiest way to prevent problems was to lock the door.

A particular student wasn't quite agreeing with his last sentences, though. "That's stupid." one of the Slytherin grumbled, addressing his neighbour. Harry noticed, though, and the boy paled when he raised his head only to see his teacher looking at him in the eye. "Err... I mean... it would be unwise to do things like... jumping off the roof... yeah... that's what I meant... sir." he amended, blushing.

"I know what you meant, Mr Montague, and that and your lie will cost Slytherin five points." Harry said coldly. "You will find that lacking respect toward me or your peers, whether it is verbal or otherwise, will earn you difficult moments." He then turned to the class. "I think it's time to lay a few ground rules. The first time, such an obvious lack of respect will cost points, as Mr Montague just demonstrated. Second offence will cost more points and physical labour. You won't want to test my patience more than twice. Cursing each other is considered as a lack of respect as well, except in the case of practical exercise." he finished in a silent classroom.

After a few seconds, he continued. "However, I understand the needs of youngsters such as you. If you want to relieve tension by casting offensive spells, the practical part of the Defence classrooms have some dummies which you can shred to bits without repercussion. If you want to cast spells on a person, there will be opportunities to do so in the fighting clubs which will open soon. If you want to cast spells on me... just say so, and we'll duel." Another pause. "Actually, I have a challenge for you, which I'll repeat to the other classes as well. Each student able to defeat me will gain 100 points for their House. Each time."

Straightening up, he looked at the class again. "Is everything understood?"

In the silence of the class, a lone hand rose timidly. "Yes, Mr Towler?" Harry addressed the Gryffindor.

“Err... Professor... you spoke about fighting clubs, sir. Aren’t they called duelling clubs? No offence, sir.”

Harry smiled. “I won’t bite if you are not blatantly polite. Act normally, and everything will be fine. I just don’t like obvious disrespect, especially when it’s meant as such. Now, I call them fighting clubs, plural, because there will be more than one. One will be about purely magical duelling. One will be with bare hands, using special techniques called martial arts. One club will be with both, meaning that magic won’t be enough to save your hide. There will be one club dedicated to fencing, and one about all-out duelling – magic, swords, and unarmed combat. And there will also be a club on all-out fighting. And my challenge extends to any of these clubs.”

“Sir?” asked Towler, who had followed the explanation raptly. “What’s the difference between the two last clubs?”

“Duelling means two fighters, one against the other. The all-out fighting means more than that. Group fighting. If you take that last one, you will see that spells like Enervate are damn useful in the middle of a battle.”

“Isn’t this kind of teaching reserved for Aurors?” asked Towler.

Harry smirked. “I wouldn’t know. But it’s just a club. However, participation will give you an additional experience, which might help you in Auror school, should you want to go there. Or you might discover that you don’t like fighting, and that will allow you to refine your career choices. Don’t forget that this is your OWL year, and you still have a choice. There’s something those fighting clubs will help you achieve, though, whatever your career considerations might be.”

The class was listening eagerly, and Harry waited for someone to ask. After a few seconds, Towler raised his hand once again. “What is it, sir?”

“Staying alive.” Harry said, and several students gasped. “Voldemort and-”

When more gasps were heard in the classroom, a couple of girls even emitting a squeak, he frowned.

“What is it? What are you afraid of? Are you afraid that this monster will suddenly appear in this classroom? Seriously, it’s just a name! As I said, grow a backbone. Besides, it sounds like a music band. Tommy-boy and his Bass Players. Voldemort and his Death Eaters. See?” he said, looking around. “The monster didn’t appear to chastise me. Even in the unlikely event of some magic having been weaved around his name in the past, you just saw that nothing happened to me.”

A pause.

“Wait...” he started, faking anxiousness while grasping his chest. “I feel some pain, now...” Another pause. “Just joking.” he finished, smiling widely and relaxing against the desk.

The students were still afraid, but some of them were chuckling at their new teacher’s strange sense of humour.

“ Now, where was I?” Harry asked, looking at his students expectantly.

After a few seconds, it was clear that he wanted an answer, and they thought about his question. Once again, it was Kenneth Towler who raised his hand. “You were talking about staying alive and You-Know-Who, professor.”

“I don’t know.” Harry deadpanned. “Do you?”

“What?”

“You said You-Know-Who. Say his name. Voldemort. It’s not that complicated. I’ll set up a little dare if you want. I’ll give 20 points to the first of you able to tell that name, and 10 points for the others able to say it for the first time. And 10 other points will be added if you don’t flinch. Who’s first? Come on, give me what you have!”

Unsurprisingly, it was a Gryffindor who raised his hand first.

“Yes, Miss Stimpson?”

“I’m muggleborn, sir. I haven’t been raised in fearing his name.”

“And a good thing you haven’t. My offer stands, with one provision. Is there a pureblood wanting to tell that name before Miss Stimpson?”

Some Slytherin purebloods squirmed on their seats at the challenge, some of them wanting to act, but their had feared the name their whole life, and their House wasn’t known for courage. When it was apparent that they wouldn’t act, Harry turned to the Gryffindor girl.

“Voldemort.” she said simply, and Harry nodded.

“As promised, 30 points to Gryffindor. Now, what I was saying is that Voldemort and his Death Eaters are very much alive and active, given that they attacked the Hogwarts Express.”

“Thank you about that, Professor.” Towler said, and some of the Slytherins rolled their eyes at the apparent flattering. Harry knew it was sincere, though. “It must be awful to have lost an arm, and- oh, I’m sorry, sir.”

Harry smiled warmly, before jumping off the desk and removing his cloak. “My arm? What arm?”

It earned him a shocked gasps from most of the students. “You... your arm... sir.” said Fred.

Harry smiled. “What about it?” he asked, raising his left arm and looking at it, the silver-coated hand glistening in the ambient light.

“It wasn’t there yesterday.” George said.

“Thank you for stating the obvious, Mr Weasley.” Harry said. “I bought it tonight. It’s nice, isn’t it?”

When he noticed that they were still looking at him with wide eyes, he clapped in his hands, the strange noise waking them somewhat. "For fifth years, I thought you wouldn't be surprised by magic. Magical artefacts such as this one can be bought, when you know where to find them."

That jolted them awake, and they blushed, looking at each other.

After several seconds of silence, he started to pace slowly in front of them. "I'd like to say something else, related to what happened at the beginning of this period. There's a difference between growing a backbone and following a leader. Mr Jordan here was a leader in the "rebellion" against my stupid orders, and Mistery Weasley followed his lead." he said, smirking at the glances between Lee and the twins. "It's the same difference that exists between having one's opinion and following the others'. Have you read the Daily Prophet recently?"

The students looked between themselves, surprised at the apparent non sequitur, and Harry knew he would have to ask questions differently when teaching. "Who read the Daily Prophet in the previous week? Raise your hand if you did."

Almost all hands rose, and he smiled. "And who read The Quibbler?"

Only one hand was raised, and tentatively at that. It was Wendy, and she recoiled under the looks of contempt of the others. Harry looked around and noticed that a Gryffindor boy was a bit queasy. Not even forcing his Legilimency, he knew why. "Mr Towler, do you have something to say?"

The addressed boy looked at him in surprise, before raising his hand as well – he was apparently too shy to admit reading something as... particular... as The Quibbler.

"Excellent! Now, who among you reads Witch Weekly?"

Towler lowered his hand suddenly, as if it was burning, and a few students sniggered while several girls raised a hand.

Harry continued with titles like Quidditch Magazine, the Ministry Gazette, and the Resourceful Cauldron, the last one having only one subscriber, a Slytherin – ‘How bizarre.’ Harry thought sarcastically, while hoping that Flamel’s presence would change the inter-house attitude and help the non-Slytherins with their potion-making skills.

For the other magazine titles, several hands were raised. Harry smiled: these students were literate enough to read more than one journal, something that was part of his explanation. However, he also knew that students from younger years wouldn’t answer in the same way – some of those weren’t even reading one. A question of maturity, perhaps. Although, with the twins in front of him, the question of maturity was hard to judge. Still, the two troublemakers had raised their hand for most of the titles he had evoked. Even Witch Weekly. The only other one for which they hadn’t was the Ministry one, and Harry had no doubt he’d have the exact opposite when he’d ask Percy.

“Most of the titles I gave you are specialized publications, and have in-depth explanations of their subject. Some can also be difficult to grasp for people not belonging to the subject as well. Only the Daily Prophet and the Quibbler are generic enough to present things on a wider scale. And, of the two, there is no question about which is the most wide-spread. Now, I know for a fact that there’s a difference between their contents, and even the front page isn’t the same. You know why?”

When no one answered, Harry continued his speech. “Because they are written by people. Real witches and wizards, who have their own opinions. On top of that, a journal often has an editorial policy.” He smirked, thinking about the Prophet’s, but continued undeterred. “In reading only one magazine, you will forge your opinions in the like of the one you read. In reading at least two, you acquire a better understanding of how the things are shown to you and why. It’s like stereoscopy, as it’s the sense of depth-”

Christopher Warrington, one of the Slytherins, interrupted him. “What does a discussion about magazines have to do with Dark Arts?”

“Our whole discussion has everything to do with Defence Against the Dark Arts, Mr Warrington.” Harry answered, turning so that he was looking at the teen. “I’m not here to teach you the Dark Arts themselves. Since you interrupted me so rudely, I should take points for speaking out of turn. You gave me a good transition, though, so I’ll abstain. This one time. Now... I think that, after four years of this course, you should know the Unforgivable Curses. Do you, Mr Warrington?”

“Err... yes.” Warrington answered, unsure of where this was leading.

“Tell us, then.”

“There’s the Cruciatus, the Imperius, and the Killing Curse.”

“Correct. Now, why are those three deemed as Unforgivables, insuring a life-long stay in Azkaban if you cast them?”

“Because... because you can’t do anything against them.”

Harry sighed. “Quite true. These three curses can’t be blocked by the usual magical shields. Don’t ask me why: the explanation of the exact reason behind this belongs to the Magical Theory course you’ll have in your seventh year. They could be blocked by other things, though, especially material things. I know that you’ll do some Conjunction with Professor McGonagall, this year. Know that that particular bit of magic could save your life.”

Harry paused for a second, and the class was dead silent. One could have heard a fly.

“However, that strength against magical shields is not the main reason why their casters deserve such a penalty. Do you know what makes those curses work?”

In the silence that followed the question, Harry sighed. He knew what Remus and Sirius had taught, and he knew that almost all years had come across that particular question the previous year. “I should tell you that I reviewed the lesson plan of my predecessors when I

accepted to teach here. You should know what emotions fuel those three curses for them to actually work.”

Hearing his words made a few students react, and three students raised their hand. “Three. How appropriate. Mr George Weasley, what mindset would you supposedly have to succeed in casting the Killing Curse?” he asked, looking at his notes.

The twins looked at each other briefly. “The need to-”

“I wasn’t speaking to you, Fred.” Harry interrupted, not even looking up, surprising the twins and the whole classroom. It was simple, really: as a mind reader, separating twins wasn’t difficult.

It took a few seconds for George to react. “Hate, sir.”

“Exactly. To cast that curse, you’d have to hate the target more than anything in the world. And, even if hate is a strong word, the feeling is even stronger. You should hate everything that person represents. An example...” Harry paused, tapping his chin for a few seconds before continuing. “I’m sure most of you don’t like Mr Filch, some of you even think that they hate him.” Harry said, and noticed that most students nodded, frowned, smirked, or looked between themselves. “He has certainly interrupted enough snogging sessions or other nightly activities to deserve some sort of resentment. However, hate is too strong a word to define what you feel about him, and, even if you know how to cast the Killing Curse, you wouldn’t succeed in casting it on him.”

Harry paused to catch his breath, looking at the students in front of him. He smirked. “Mr Filch is just another human being, after all. He seems compassionate enough to harbour a poor cat, too. Let’s not forget that he has the ungrateful job of looking after hundreds of students in a cold castle. Really, there’s no need to raise his pay by making him risk death from said students.”

The class chuckled, and Harry continued his questions. “Mr Fred Weasley, now. What’s the emotion behind the Cruciatus?”

“Anger, sir, but the actual will to inflict pain works better. Or so said our previous teachers.”

“Perfectly said, thank you. Miss Fawcett, about the Imperius?”

“It’s the will to control, sir. To remove the other one’s thought processes and to replace by your own. You’ll have to negate that person’s freedom of mind. It could lead to the victim doing forbidden acts, or even killing themselves.”

Harry said nothing for a couple seconds, the girl’s words impacting on him somewhat. He then shook himself awake and smiled. “That is correct. And that’s why the Unforgivables are outlawed. You could kill someone by using other curses, but the all-encompassing hate behind the Killing Curse isn’t forgivable, hence these curses’ collective name. And the punishment.”

He smiled and looked around. “Now, Mr Warrington is certainly asking himself what is the link between this parenthesis about the Unforgivables and the press. Let me tell you something: you can do something against at least one of the Unforgivables: you can fight off the Imperius.”

“How?” blurted Fred Weasley.

The other students were whispering to each other, and Harry raised his hands. “The key to free oneself of the Imperius is one’s strength of will.” he said. “And one’s strength of will is the same thing as one’s mental backbone. Getting his mind disciplined by analysing anything you mind get in contact with, that’s the first step towards this mental backbone. A mental backbone is something that will tell you to act against the orders of the Imperius caster, thus freeing yourself from it.”

Harry waited a few seconds before knotting his rhetorical loop. “And that’s why I told you about the press, and why we saw the difference between respect and mindless obedience.”

The students' eyes lit up and they sat straighter, and Harry knew then that they had understood and that they were ready to follow his next ideas. And he hadn't got this reaction by magical means, only by talking to them! He also felt something else, rolling in waves from the students. With a start, he realized what it was: he had just gained their respect.

"Great to see that you are awake!" Harry said amusedly, before drawing his new willow wand. The "weak" one.

"Sir?" asked Wendy nervously. "What are you doing with that wand?"

"There's something else I'd like to tell you. For today, I'll lay the rules before starting, but expect me to continue as the year progresses. The rules are simple: from the moment you enter the classroom, you are targets, and you must defend yourselves. For each period, it ends when you leave the room or when someone is a touched, myself included."

He noticed that, by now, a few students had started to get their wands out, but most of them were listening without reaction, and all of them were still unsure of what was happening.

"Macula Scribus!" he exclaimed, using as little power as possible. The result was a drop of ink shooting off his wand and hurling towards his target of choice for that period: Christopher Warrington. Well... crawling would be a better metaphor since the drop took a whole second to reach the shocked teen. However, the students were still processing what he had said, and the Slytherin student, despite having his wand drawn, saw the drop of red ink make a splotch over his Slytherin insignia.

"Points will be awarded if you manage to defend yourself successfully." Harry said, continuing as if nothing had happened, and stowing his wand away in the process. "You will only use evasion techniques or shielding spells, no aggressive spell – I don't want you to accidentally curse your colleagues."

“But... sir?” Adrian Pucey blurted, looking at him while Warrington was staring at his Gryffindor-tinged crest in dismay.

“Yes, Mr Pucey?”

“Your spell... it was ink, right? How can we defend against material things?”

“Two point for Slytherin. It was ink, yes, and you’ll see how to cast a magical shield blocking matter...” he looked at his watch for effect. “Right now.”

For the rest of the double period, the students worked on such a shield, learning the theory first before going to the larger room to practise it relentlessly... after running a few laps, of course – Harry didn’t want his students to lose the small fitness improvement they got by Sirius’ methods.

That evening...

When Harry entered his quarters after the afternoon classes, he was smiling. Exhausted, but content. And proud of his day’s work.

He had just finished his "detention" with the Weasley twins, during which he had revealed his true identity to them. The resulting conversation had been joyful, with the twins practically gushing with enthusiasm at his teaching style. Harry was quite happy about their reaction, and he was also reassured about the state of their mental vaults – the twins wouldn’t be able to communicate about his secrets unless they were among people "in the know", and protected under a privacy charm.

As Harry entered his rooms, he heard a weird sound coming from his cupboard. His smile disappeared immediately, and he crouched in a fighting stance, letting the door close itself behind him. He straightened up quickly, though, when he recognized the reason for the sound: Sinistra’s mirror! A thought suddenly struck him, and he slammed his hand to his forehead: Sinistra’s topic was Astronomy, and, working only at nights, she didn’t have the same planning than

the other staff members. The Death Eaters must have known this, and they could call her anytime in the day!

Harry looked at the noisy item, trying to think about what to do. He didn't know for how long it has been ringing, but he knew that it wasn't before the second afternoon period, because that was the last time he had been in his quarters. He decided to do his best for the current situation, and to correct it "later" if he had to. As he didn't know all the details of how Sinistra's mirror worked, he supposed that he had to appear as the Astronomy professor, and realized he had to act fast. Even faster than "right now."

He Apparated out, and turned his Time Turner three times towards the past.

Once back at 3pm, knowing that his past self was starting his second afternoon period, he returned to tangibility and reflected about his current situation. How was he going to kill time while waiting for the call?

He had a few good ideas.

But, whatever he would choose, it was going to be a long day. Again.

With a chuckle, he thought about what had happened since 24 hours ago, when the Hogwarts Express had been attacked. It had really been the longest day of his life.

To be continued in next chapter: An Earth-Rending Encounter...

This very long chapter might
Be sign of the use, daily,
Of a Time Turner. The fight?
It's just a skirmish, really.

Chapter 28 – An Earth-Rending Encounter

posted January 19th, 2006

Harry looked through the window, and stopped what he was doing.

After returning back in time, he had pocketed Sinistra's mirror – Levitating it inside one of the enlarged pockets of his belt. He then checked with Cassie about Sinistra's location, before Apparating to his second bedroom to prepare. He had thought he'd work on his Animagus forms discreetly, and had even started to emulate the chameleon's effect – his Venetian cloak acting on his animal shapes' hide colour.

The outside sight had startled him. He already knew that the window overlooked a part of the grounds, but it was the first time that he realized where exactly he was looking. It was Hagrid's hut and the paddock nearby, where the large man was teaching Care of the Magical Creatures. Apparently, given what was in the paddock down there, the third year Gryffindor and Slytherin students were having a lesson about some large creature, a mix between a horse and a large eagle.

Genuinely curious about it, Harry Apparated outside without changing from the owl shape he was currently in, and he approached the enclosure where Hagrid was teaching. It was just in time to hear the last words of a diatribe about respecting the creatures, which the half-giant called Hippogriffs. Harry smiled, noticing the similarity with his own course – Respect being the keyword. After all, the beasts really looked regal and imposing. And dangerous.

As he was nearing the paddock, looking at them, he felt foreign emotions swirling around his mind. Thinking that it was a form of mental attack from somewhere, he almost Apparated out before realizing two things: one, it was coming from the assembled beasts; and, two, it was merely his peripheral Legilimency picking on their thoughts. Yes, thoughts. With a shock, Harry realized that these creatures were highly intelligent, and that the noble stance they assumed was more than an attitude: it was their way of life. As the students started to move around the paddock slowly, most of them

showing the proper respect to the fearsome beasts, Harry sat on a nearby branch and started a mental conversation with one of them.

It was awkward at first, but Harry and the hippogriff quickly found "words" to communicate. The boy learnt that the beast was called Buckbeak by the humans, and Buckbeak learnt a bit about why an owl was able to chat with him mentally. They stopped discussing when a trio of students approached the beast, both of them having an uneasy feeling about them already.

Unfortunately, in any given group of human beings, especially teenagers, there are always persons pretending to know better than to follow the simplest safety instructions.

Of the three students in front of Buckbeak, one was even rude enough to insult the hippogriff.

“They couldn’t make us study dangerous beasts, could they?” asked Malfoy, his trademark sneer in place. “I bet you’re as dangerous as Longbottom’s pet toad. Aren’t you, you disgusting fat swine?” he asked towards Buckbeak, before turning to his friends to share a laugh.

That infuriated the creature, and neither Hagrid nor the students had time to intervene when the hippogriff lunged at the blond boy with a shriek of rage, causing gasps and screams around the paddock. Malfoy’s laugh finished in a pained squeak as the creature’s sharp talons slashed towards his shoulder, the powerful beak snapping a hair’s breadth in front of his nose.

What nobody knew, though, was that Harry had felt the hippogriff’s uneasiness morph into a towering rage. While he was agreeing on it on principle, he knew that a beast attacking a wizard was to face dire consequences, and he wouldn’t want that for the noble creature. In the nick of time, he had succeeded in calming the seething mind, and the hippogriff’s lunge fell an inch shorter than intended, with Malfoy only sporting shredded clothes and a scratched skin.

The boy fell on his bottom and recoiled, though, holding his arm as if he was deadly wounded. While he was slowly edging away of the

still-screeching beast, Hagrid hurried forward, facing the hippogriff but addressing Malfoy over his shoulder. "What did ye do? Ye provoked him, did ye?" he asked, trying to appease the animal – and failing. At least, Buckbeak wasn't attacking him. Harry wasn't sure if Hagrid could have survived that, even with his tough hide.

Malfoy had taken advantage of Hagrid's interference to stand up again. "Of course not!" he protested, his arrogance having returned, now that he was upright again. He winced in mock pain as he was nursing his arm. "I didn't do anything, and it attacked me!"

Obviously, the hippogriffs understood humans' language, because the boy's sentence angered the beast even more.

"Get out of 'ere!" bellowed Hagrid. "Go to the Hospital if you're hurt, but leave now!"

The blond boy left, dragging Crabbe and Goyle behind him. He was clearly reluctant, wanting to watch as the teacher he thought of as a disgusting half-breed was reduced to ribbons by the beast. However, he still wanted to act as though he was seriously wounded, and he also knew he shouldn't push his luck too far concerning that particular animal. The three Slytherins left, and Buckbeak calmed down almost instantly. After several minutes, he would even allow Neville to mount him for a short ride.

Harry didn't see Neville doing so, though. When he had overheard Malfoy swearing on his way to the castle, and suspecting that it wasn't only a childish temper tantrum, he had decided to follow him, if only to hear what it was about. He had flown behind a couple of trees in order to Apparate out unnoticed, and was now in the gaseous reality, following the infamous Slytherin trio.

Malfoy was grumbling about his father and some executioner from the Ministry. The monologue was rather confusing, involving terms like Committee, Dangerous, and Regulation, but the gist of the boy's rant was that he wanted Buckbeak dead, and Hagrid fired. Harry wasn't fond of disposing of such a fine creature, and, after all, it was all Malfoy's fault.

As the three Slytherin were entering a deserted corridor, he heard Malfoy telling Goyle to stand guard while Crabbe would cast a Cutting Curse on his arm. When the boy noticed his bodyguards' lack of understanding, he explained that Pomfrey would make a useful witness in his case against the hippogriff, and he would have to appear heavily wounded.

Having more brainpower than Malfoy's bodyguards, Harry had understood midway through the boy's explanation, and he decided to prevent this. Thankfully, with his new position, that wasn't going to be difficult.

He went further down the corridor and Apparated behind a corner, before approaching them. "A problem, boys?"

"Nothing we can't resolve by ourselves." Malfoy said testily, trying to act nonchalant to avoid the teacher's attention.

"But... you're wounded!" Harry exclaimed. "Hurry, you have to go to the infirmary, boy. In fact, I'll accompany you." he said, grabbing the boy's good shoulder. Despite Malfoy's spluttering, he then turned towards Crabbe and Goyle. "You two go back to where you came from."

When the two lumberjacks had left, Harry enquired about the situation with as much candour as possible. "What happened?"

As he was leading the boy towards Madam Pomfrey's domain, he half-listened to the boy's recounting, trying not to laugh. According to Malfoy, a herd of rampaging hippogriffs, led by a humongous grey one, had started wreaking havoc on the whole class and he stopped them single-handedly. Harry wasn't quite happy of hearing this, especially because he had the distinct impression that the boy was sucking up to him. 'Wait for your first class, Malfoy... You'll have a surprise.' he thought, ideas of humiliating punishments right in place should the boy step out of line. And he was sure he would.

When they arrived in the infirmary, Harry made sure that the nurse had seen the whole little extent of the boy's wounds, before returning to his quarters, a satisfied smirk on his face.

While Harry was waiting for the mirror's call, he decided to forego his Animagus training, focusing on something else instead: charms on his muggle weapons. He sat comfortably and read a bit more of that particular book. After a few minutes, he was completely engrossed in it. The book was filled with interesting information, ideas, and spells, all of which he could apply not only to his crossbow, but also to his other muggle weapons, and even to armour. There were spells to speed up the reloading time and consequently the firing rate of weapons with ammunition, while some changed such weapons' range. Other spells were used on ammunition itself, with various effects. Spells existed to highlight the current target the weapon was aimed at, with the option of making it known only to the user – a kind of visor with homing device. Several of the ideas were everyday spells, but not everyone thought of applying them on muggle weaponry: the sticking charm to avoid being disarmed, for example, or strengthening charms for armours and weapons...

Half an hour into reading the book, Harry decided to try to cast the charms on his crossbow immediately. The first one was the summoning thing he had read when he had bought it. It involved a ring, which he Transfigured from a splinter, a container, and the weapon itself. After checking with the instructions twice, Harry tried the charm, and the magic settled in what seemed appropriate. He then put the ring on his finger and turned it as the spell description indicated. The crossbow disappeared from the tabletop and reappeared in his hand. He turned his ring the other way, and the crossbow disappeared. He checked his belt pocket and found the weapon there.

He smiled. That had been one of the most complicated spells of the book, and he continued casting spells until an unwelcome noise disturbed him.

The mirror.

He looked at his belt in surprise, and realized two things at the same time: one, he hadn't morphed his features into Sinistra's yet; and, two, he didn't know how to activate the poisoned mirror without touching it. In the blink of an eye, he decided to use the wayward teacher herself.

The time was 5pm, one hour before his past self would enter his quarters. It reminded him of something, but he put that on the side of his mind for the moment. Did the caller really let it ring for one hour?

‘Well... no time like the present.’ he thought, before stopping at the stupidity of that particular sentence right now.

He shook himself awake, and, after checking with Cassie to confirm that Sinistra was still in her quarters, he Apparated out and headed there. The woman was on her bed, reading some book from Gilderoy Lockhart – it wasn't hard to miss the man's face when it took most of the back cover – with a hand under her robe. Harry shook his head in dismay, before taking grasp of her mind like the previous time. Once her consciousness was bound, he Levitated the still-ringing mirror in her hands and took command of her body.

“Communicate.” he made her hiss.

A blurred face appeared, who started to ask random questions, and Harry discovered that the man's voice was disguised as well. He also discovered the futility of this kind of questioning as all the answers were in good place in the woman's mind. It made him understand something, though: judging from the background of question asked, Harry was quite sure it was Snape on the other side.

“What have you found about the new teachers?” the blurry shape finally asked when the identification part was passed.

Harry checked what the woman would have answered, and he edited a good part out of it. “Defence is taught by the teacher who fought so hard at the train, Henry Evans.”

“Evans... I wonder if it's the same line... go on.” the interlocutor said.

“It seems that he lost an arm, there, but he seemed fine.”

“How could he be fine?”

“He came to the Sorting Feast, just after the Sorting proper.”

“Hmm... continue.”

“Slytherin got seven new students, and Gryffindor got six.”

“Anyone interested in... joining us?”

Harry knew that it was information they could find by other means, so, despite his initial idea of hiding it, he relayed the information. “We have four seventh year students interested to join us, and three sixth year. On top of what we know already, of course.”

“Good.”

“Care of Magical Creatures it taught by Hagrid.”

“That oaf! Alright... continue.”

“Alchemy is taught by-”

“WHAT? There’s no Potion anymore?”

“Seems that Dumbledore decided to change his views on the course. It’s taught by Flamel. He’s the one who-”

“I know who Flamel is.” Snape’s voice, even filtered, carried all the man’s contempt for the Alchemist and his work. Even if the man had lived more than six centuries. “Anything else?”

“That’s all.”

“Alright. Next call same time, in two weeks. Be faster to answer.”

Harry bit back a retort and made the woman nod. When the mirror cleared, he Stunned Sinistra and edited her recent memories before unbinding her consciousness. He then returned to his rooms and Levitated the cursed mirror back where it was stored: the left drawer of his cupboard. However, when he started to close the drawer, a stray thought hit him. Impacted him, rather.

The mirror wouldn't ring!

If he left things as they were, the mirror wouldn't ring when his past self would reach the room, and he thus wouldn't be warned of the call, and he wouldn't go back in the past. Dumbledore had warned Harry of the possibilities of paradoxes, and Harry didn't want his person scattered over the floor of his apartment in half an hour.

He hurried back to Sinistra's room, and, while she was still asleep, he dug through her stuff and fished his mirror out. Of his brand new pair, it was the one which he had transfigured to look like hers. He then returned to his rooms and put the mirror where he had stored the Death Eaters' one. Satisfied, he Apparated to his second bedroom, and used the second mirror of the pair to place the call. A call he left hanging even though he was hearing the mirror ring behind the wall.

As he was doing so, a stray thought hit him: he wasn't strictly preventing inconsistencies in the timeline: he was doing as much as possible for his past self to never notice him, keeping his memories consistent. Was that the gist of the time-related paradoxes? Thinking about it made him realize that there were always things you changed by going back in time. Were those infamous paradoxes only connected to the time traveller alone?

He had many questions, but no one to ask them to. Even his distant cousin Alison, the most knowledgeable of his acquaintances with regard to magic, had reacted with genuine curiosity when he had told her about the Time Turner in one of his letters, this summer. And Harry didn't want to ask Dumbledore. The old man wouldn't understand how he had come to such insights. Thinking of the Headmaster reminded Harry that he had to do something about Sinistra: he had been lucky this time, but he wasn't sure to be able to

deal with her efficiently if the mirror rang again. And, to be honest, he started to feel tired to play spy games without help.

However, he wasn't going to use Henry Evans' shape to turn the spy in. After pocketing his Phoenix ring, he morphed into Jerry Homest, an action which still took him half an hour – he needed to remove his prosthesis and to regrow his arm. When it was achieved, he looked at the time and nodded, satisfied. While he was morphing his body, his past self had noticed the call and disappeared in time.

He tried to flex his left arm to ease a possible cramp, but the reaction he got made him jump a foot or two in the air.

On the bed where he had placed it, his metal arm had moved!

Harry approached and tried to move his arm again, and, again, the steel arm responded. He looked at the limb he had regrown and frowned, before smiling, mentally thanking Goken. Using the nerves that his mind associated with his third arm, he finally succeeded in moving his left arm around.

His eyes returned to the false limb and he smirked. That was definitely weird... and interesting. He straightened up and, after cancelling his mirror call, he decided to Apparated to the edge of Hogwarts' wards for good measure. And he then went to see the Headmaster.

It was time to give the old man some food for thoughts.
A fortnight later...

The evening meal was best described as... usual. However, the Headmaster's intervention would start a hubbub that would last for days. He stood and waved his wand in a circle, making a booming sound which caught everyone's attention and stopped the discussions.

“Sorry to disturb your end of meal discussions, but, now that that wonderful pudding had been taken care of, I have some information I'd like to share with you. First of all, Hogsmeade weekends are returning, starting next week.”

Dumbledore paused for the ensuing cheer to recede, before continuing. "As usual, third years and above are free to go, with your parents' approval. However, because of the attack on the Hogwarts Express, there will be security measures during these visits: Aurors and teachers will be on patrol, and, if anything untoward happens, you will have to follow the procedures that will be outlined in the Defence class in the forthcoming week. Do not worry, though: new wards have been erected around the town, preventing all kind of trouble – except jokes, of course."

Some laughter echoed in the vast room, but most of it was forced, and it quieted quickly.

"Additionally, I have to tell you that there is a new building in Hogsmeade: a school!" Dumbledore said, and, after spending a couple seconds enjoying the confused looks he received, the old man went on. "A primary school, I should say. There aren't many pupils yet, but I have the feeling that their numbers will grow soon. For those of you not understanding – or not remembering – the concept, let's just say that it's a place for parents to put their child for a day so that they could do something private."

A loud and repeated cough interrupted him, and he turned to his Deputy Headmistress, his eyes twinkling again. "Alright, that's not how I intended to say it," he amended, earning himself frank bouts of laughter around the room. "Think of it as a place where underage students can be taught to control their magic in a legal and safe environment. It's like Hogwarts!" he exclaimed genially. "Except there are no classes as such."

Several groans echoed from the room – except for the Ravenclaw table, where students didn't find the classes as unattractive as the other Houses did. McGonagall stood and said something in Dumbledore's ear. He nodded and spoke up again. "My esteemed colleague informed me that there are courses, actually. The panel involved in building and staffing that school judged that some young wizards and witches lacked in writing, calculating, and common sense." He paused, thoughtful for a second, before turning to

McGonagall. In a stage whisper loud enough to be heard in the whole hall, he said “Was that for me?”

Once again, laughter was heard around the room, and the old Headmaster straightened up, surveying the room with an amused expression. Once order was re-established, he spoke again.

“That was to say that you could find younger children in Hogsmeade – although rarely during weekends, in fact – and I expect you to be kind to them. If they are alone, bring them to the school – you can’t miss it.”

Dumbledore paused for breath before continuing. “Since I spoke about Defence a tad bit earlier, I guess it’s the good moment to tell you about something that you already know. Clubs. As Professor Evans told you, several clubs will open, which aren’t mandatory and won’t include grades or anything that awful.” Dumbledore pretended to ignore the sniggers and went on. “I have been informed that a music club is open to all wanting to learn, play, or just listen to music, every day after dinner. Club manager is Kenneth Towler, Gryffindor – although you’ll find him in the music room more often than in his tower. The fighting clubs Professor Evans told you about, and which he will manage, will be held between five to seven – which means from after your last class until dinner, with a few minutes in between. Students in sixth or seventh year, most of you have conflicting schedules with these clubs, and you will only be able to enter after six. Those of you having chosen Defence for your NEWTs will remark, though, that the magical duelling club, held on Mondays, is a continuation of your Defence class. This club is mandatory for you. The unarmed fighting club will be held on Tuesdays, and, yes, for those of you knowing what that means, Professor Evans told me to inform you that it’s Martian arts.”

Harry snorted, as did numerous students around the hall. Unfazed, the old and slightly barmy old man continued. “Members of these two clubs can also participate in a third, held on Wednesdays, and about fighting with a mix of the techniques learnt there. There will be a fencing club on Thursdays, too, and an all-out duelling club on Fridays for those of you crazy enough to belong to the other ones. And, on Saturdays, for the craziest among us – and I don’t mean my

own self – the all-out fighting club will be held. Know that none of these clubs has a higher precedence than homework, detentions, or other classes, though.”

Dumbledore paused to drink some butterbeer from his goblet, and allowed the whispers to die down before continuing his long talk.

“Another good bit of information: Quidditch!” Another cheer. “Thank you. We are doing things a bit differently this year, and you will understand why in a few minutes. First of all, there will be one more position to be filled, but it’s not a playing one. We, the teachers, distinctively noticed that some people helped their team play, and we felt that it was only fair to help you organize yourselves accordingly. Thus comes, like for the professional teams, the Coach position. As this is the first time we do that in Hogwarts, the faculty has taken the liberty of selecting Coaches for the different teams.”

Dumbledore paused and looked at the expectant young faces in front of him. “Can Douglas Dougal, Martin McAllister, Hermione Granger, and William Garnet stand up?”

When the four students had stood, quite stunned at the decision, Dumbledore spoke again. “Here are the coaches for our teams. The Captains have been selected as well, for those Houses devoid of them. Oliver Wood, Cedric Diggory, Brutus Armstrong, and Marcus Flint are your Quidditch Captains this year. Yes, you can stand up, too. As usual, the new captains have been selected because of their obvious interest in the game, the fact that they belong to the team already, and because they have grades high enough to ensure that they won’t fail their year because of Quidditch. The coaches have been selected because they are interested in Quidditch but not in playing, they are fair, and, like the Captains, they have sufficient grades so that the activity won’t impact them tremendously. Thank you all for meeting these requirements.” he said to the eight standing – and blushing – students. He started applauding, and was quickly imitated by the whole room.

When the applause receded, the students sat down, and Dumbledore continued his speech. “The Coaches will have to manage the team, during the game and out of it. The Captaincy is kept, but it now

focuses solely on managing the team in the air. We have the hope of producing more experienced players that way, thus enhancing our local and national teams.”

The room emitted a massive cheer at these words, and several students started to discuss between them agitatedly.

“More annoying rules: should a coach want to step down, for any reason, they can choose their successor. The coach has authority over the team’s captain, but that can be overruled if the whole team rallies the captain’s ideas. If that happens too many times... well, you will have a conflict to settle before the team loses too many games. Now, as I said before, the coach is responsible for holding the tryouts to fill not seven, but fourteen positions: the regular team and a reserve one. This is to provide reserve players should there be a need about it, and I’m sure that it would enhance your practises as well. In fact, I have been told that almost all professional teams did like that already.” Dumbledore turned thoughtful. “Things sure changed in the last 150 years.”

Laughter rang through the room again, before being replaced by excited whispers.

“I’m not finished.” the Headmaster said, and silence returned. “I’m not even finished with Quidditch. I seriously hope to raise Hogwarts’ average skill in Quidditch, because, this year, a particular event has been scheduled on top of everything: there will be two more games of Quidditch scheduled this year, after the final exams. The House team in possession of the Hogwarts Quidditch Cup at that time will have the challenge of going against two other Quidditch teams to try to gain a special trophy for the school.”

There was a silence following these words, and, rolling her eyes at having to play the accomplice in the man’s theatrics, McGonagall whispered some more words to Dumbledore’s ear.

“Oh, yes.” Dumbledore said. “I forgot to tell you who you are going against. Durmstrang and Beauxbatons.” He smiled while a stunned silence welcomed his words. “I expect you to crush them.”

The students reacted immediately, and shouted their approval, before turning towards each other and generally gravitating around the Quidditch captains and coaches. Unheeded, Dumbledore sat down and knocked back the rest of his butterbeer. He then looked at McGonagall and smiled.

“That year is going to be interesting.”

He had no idea just how much.

The students had taken quite a long time to vacate the Great Hall, but some teachers had departed already. For some attentive viewer, it would seem that, certain evenings, several teachers left within a few minute of each other. However, there has never been a pattern of departure for the members of the Order of the Phoenix, and they safely congregated in the Headmaster’s office soon afterwards.

“Thank you for being here tonight.” Dumbledore said, standing up. The move dragged the eyes of everyone towards the old Headmaster, and to the two empty seats next to him. Alastor Moody sat on the other side, a smug smile on his scarred face. Thanks to his charmed glasses, Harry knew why, but he refrained from showing anything – after all, he didn’t intend to tell anyone about his glasses.

Dumbledore continued. “There has been to be quite an uproar in St Mungo a fortnight ago, and I told them to keep it under wraps until the case could be presented. Now that the patients are stable, physically and mentally, I would like you to welcome two of our oldest members: Frank and Alice Longbottoms!”

Two Invisibility cloaks were removed and the two Aurors appeared, refreshed and happy, their body still thin but their faces smiling.

Seeing that most of the members were either too shocked to speak or were too recently included to know about them, Frank spoke first. “It’s nice to be back, guys.” Frank said.

“It’s not a trick?” asked Flitwick. “You’re the real... you?”

“Yes. Ask Mad-Eye if you must, but he grilled me for half an hour before trying to break my ribs by hugging me.”

The old Auror nodded, before barking “Constant Vigilance!” something which awoke the others.

After several minutes of small talk, Alice asked the million-Galleon question. “Now, it’s all good and fine, but where is Neville?”

“I wanted to show to the Order that you are alive and well, for them not to curse you on sight later, thinking that you are some Polyjuiced Death Eater.” Dumbledore said, before turning to Moody. “Alastor suggested the idea.”

Moody grumbled, and Dumbledore didn’t press the issue. “Now that we know, I think that meeting your son can be arranged. I still need to talk with you, so I will be glad if you can come here afterwards. Minerva, can you find an empty classroom for them?”

McGonagall acquiesced and led the couple out of the office. In a display of reborn skill, the two of them Disillusioned themselves when they entered the public area, before following the Transfiguration teacher along the way. Each of the three burned with impatience at talking with each other, but the couple was even more anxious at meeting their 13 years old son after all that time. They didn’t actually remember him visiting them, and most of their memories of him were as a baby. The two of them had discussed about it in depth, though, and had found that they had memories of him as a teenager. And at school. Wanting to see Neville in person before anything else, they had never thanked Dumbledore for what they thought was a sly manoeuvre from him to get them on their feet.

When McGonagall entered the small classroom again, she was followed by a healthy teenage boy, a boy who was self-confident enough to have engaged into small talk with his stern Head of House on the way. When she locked and Silenced the door, though, he looked at her in surprise.

“Mr Longbottom... Neville... it’s about your parents... something had happened.” she started, and he paled. Seeing that he was taking it the wrong way, she quickly amended herself. “Something wonderful! Sorry for misleading you.”

He looked at her with incomprehension etched in his features. “But, Professor... they... what is it? What can it be? I’ve been told, again and again, that their state couldn’t improve.”

“Oh, but they have, believe me. I learnt it just this evening.”

Neville was practically bouncing on his feet. “I need to see them! When can I leave?”

“There is no need for you to leave-”

“Professor, please!”

“-because they are here.”

A pause. “They are here?” whispered Neville.

McGonagall nodded. “They didn’t want to shock you by appearing while you thought them in St Mungo, but they are right here.” she said, before looking to where she knew the couple was waiting. “Alice, Frank... it’s whenever you are ready.”

The two revived Aurors cancelled the Disillusion spell and looked at Neville with moist eyes. “Come to us, son.” Frank said. “There’s so much we have to catch up.” Alice added.

The boy himself was having trouble breathing, his feeling of joy threatening to overwhelm him. “My parents...” he whispered, before lunging at them for a three-way hug.

Minerva McGonagall smiled, and dabbed her kerchief at her crying eyes before leaving the classroom, locking the door behind her – she knew either Alice or Frank could bypass it, and she didn’t want them to be disturbed.

At the same time, back in the Headmaster's office...

"Now, I have to tell you about some business we have with spies." Dumbledore said. "Over the year, I noticed that some of you came across a spy I have, even antagonizing her in a few cases. It's high time I come clear with you about it. Minerva knows, so there's no need to repeat this outside of this circle. In fact, I added some charms in this office so that nothing important can be revealed accidentally outside of it."

"Your spy, Albus?" Moody said, bringing the older man on his track again.

"Ah, yes. And, before I tell you her name, know that, for an unknown reason, she has changed from the inquisitive nature some of you might remind her for. In fact, her more recent articles contain nothing but the truth. They don't sell as well, but it appears that she doesn't care anymore. Her name is Rita Skeeter."

"WHAT?"

The exclamation came from several persons, and the group started to debate about the reporter-turned-spy. When it appeared that the debate wouldn't calm itself, Dumbledore poked his wand in the air once, producing a loud clap and silencing the group.

"Thank you. All you have to know is that I inspected her mind thoroughly and found her trustworthy. From now on, if you see her somewhere, please don't go out of your way to annoy her."

Some members looked disgruntled at this, but, as Dumbledore was staring at them, they nodded.

"Good." Dumbledore said. "That's the good spy. Now, I have received word about a bad spy."

"Snape?" someone asked in a mocking voice, and Dumbledore shook his head.

“Not Seve- I guess I’m not familiar with him anymore... Not Snape, no. But someone from Hogwarts staff. Someone else, I mean.”

“WHAT?” The exclamation was louder, this time, nobody there accepting the fact.

“As you might know, or not, Snape had been held in his quarters, last June, and he managed to circumvent the charms I put on his door and acquire his wand, before confronting two other teachers on Hogwarts grounds. He couldn’t have escaped without help, and I had suspicions since then. I couldn’t do much because of the holidays, and I have only recently received word – and proof – that the Death Eater, and spy for Voldemort, is Professor Sinistra.”

The collective gasp made him pause in his speech, and he shook his head sadly. “I do not know how that had been done, but I know that she wasn’t one when we recruited her. Perhaps Snape...” he trailed off.

“What are we going to do?” Harry asked, playing his part as a surprised and disgusted teacher.

“I don’t want her near my babies!” Molly Weasley exclaimed suddenly. “Surely, you can expel her, Albus!”

“I could, but I would need to recruit a new teacher, then, and, with Voldemort on the prowl, I am quite sure that I will have a candidate or two belonging to his Death Eaters. Even if I can read the minds completely to learn their true loyalties – something I did with Rita Skeeter, by the way – it is not guaranteed that I will even have a non-Death Eater candidate. An announcement of vacancy could very well spell the death of every Light-aligned Astronomy specialist.” He paused for a few seconds, before sighing. “I don’t want to fire her.”

“WHAT?”

“There’s a proverb saying “Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.” and I feel it is appropriate. If I fire her, she returns to the Death Eaters. If I keep her, I can feed her with false information.”

“It’s a dangerous game, Albus.” Moody interjected. “Especially with students around.”

“That is why I want your input on this. Any idea?”

“We can put her under Imperius.” Mundungus Fletcher said from his end of the table.

“And who would cast the Unforgivable?” asked Dumbledore, before shaking his head. “Despite being interesting in theory, this option presents two disadvantages: there are some signs which make the spell visible, especially when one is forced to act against their will. They are almost unrecognisable, but I am sure the Death Eaters are familiar with the curse. The second drawback is that she’s highly resistant to mind-control curses and she might as well shake it off.”

“How do you know?” Moody asked.

“The source who gave me proof about her loyalties told me that as well. It appears that he’s quite the Legilimens himself.”

“Who is it?” enquired Moody, always the paranoid one. “Your source, I mean.”

Dumbledore thought about it before nodding to himself. “Jerry Homest.”

“The reporter?” Molly asked. “You are consorting with the wrong people, there, Albus. First Skeeter, then that Homest person.”

“At least he writes coherent articles.” Arthur interjected, trying to calm his wife. “And he’s the only one who published an interview of Harry Potter, which is a proof that he’s not really in league with Voldemort.”

“What does Potter have to do in the whole picture?” asked Harry.

“I will tell you later.” Dumbledore said. “For now, we need to focus on Sinistra’s problem, without firing her.”

McGonagall entered the office at that very moment, and she heard the last sentence. “We could keep her for a while, monitoring her, discreetly blocking her access to information, while quietly recruiting someone else. When we find someone able to take her place, we hold her in a cell and Polyjuice her replacement. While she’s imprisoned, she can’t communicate.”

There was a pause as the stern teacher sat down.

“What?” she asked. “I just happen to have heard this before, and I had time to think about it.”

“There’s one problem, though.” Dumbledore said. “Her channel of discussion with the Death Eaters is an enchanted mirror which poisons anyone holding it who is not a marked Death Eater themselves.”

A pause.

“That seriously limits our options.” Moody deadpanned.

“We could put her in a place where she will be in Hogwarts without being there. A sort of cell where she would still think that she’s a teacher here.” McGonagall said pensively.

“What do you mean?” Moody asked.

“There’s a special room in this castle, where we could hold her. This room can be modelled into pretty much anything, and I am sure that our Headmaster can model it into the whole Astronomy Tower.”

Dumbledore looked at her, and his twinkle returned to his eyes. “The Room of Requirements... of course!”

And so, the plan laid in front of them, the Order of the Phoenix separated, a couple of them being given the task of discreetly finding a worthwhile Astronomy teacher in other countries.

When Harry returned to his office, he noticed a school owl waiting for him. He knew that mail sent to teacher was redirected to their quarters, except when a particular spell was applied on the message to denote urgency – in which case, the owl was to find the teacher wherever he was.

The message was small, and to the point.

We need to talk. -- Nicholas

Harry looked at the message, frowning. For fourteen days, he had carefully avoided the old Alchemist. He was rarely going to meals, and always late, so the old man was already sitting and he could choose the table's other side. There was something about him that screamed at his enhanced senses, and he couldn't put his finger on it.

Apparently, Flamel had noticed. And, apparently, he wanted to set things straight. 'Why now, damn him.' Harry thought, before remembering what he had to do now, "now" being the operative word although, once again, it held a different meaning for Harry. He had to do something earlier this afternoon, and he activated his Time Turner to do so.

Once done, he Apparated to Venice, activating his mask and cloak on the way.

When he left Venice, four hours afterwards, Harry was tired. The Knighthood was quite small, but the members had argued fiercely against Harry's inclusion in their numbers. Leonardo had been forced to use his political weight in the equation, reminding the knights that he was their leader and that there was an old law allowing non-Venetian people in the Knighthood. He had also insisted on Harry's help in bringing the Doge position back to a Venetian, and the resulting positive impact on the community's welfare.

After much grumbling, Harry had finally been inducted, and, as the knighthood's first goal was to protect Venice, he had received a shield emblazoned with the Knighthood's crest: the winged lion of St Mark. He learnt that he would receive the accompanying sword after two years as novice, but he had the feeling that the other knights would never allow it. It didn't matter, however: he had his own blades.

After the induction ceremony ended, the reunion of knights reverted to an informal meeting, catching up for the long years the knighthood had spent without a head. Harry took advantage of the casualness to escape to Switzerland to rest for a bit.

When he entered the house, Harry smiled, and realized that his instinct of coming here might have been dictated by his visions. Powell was here. The man had skirted the two last weekly meetings, leaving only one message saying that he was fine but in the middle of a deep infiltration mission. Self-assigned, of course.

The two of them greeted each other cordially, and the man explained about his mission. A month ago, he had asked Harry to give him the face and identity of one of the CIA agents they knew as dead. The man had then gone to Langley, to make sure that the spree against wizards the GRU had initiated hadn't transmitted to the American Agency. Once satisfied, he had carefully removed his tracks and was now taking some well-deserved vacation in Geneva. After returning the man's physical attributes and identity to normalcy, Harry spent an hour pleasantly discussing with him, before taking his leave.

Like he had been doing every day for two weeks, he turned back time and headed to Japan. Regrowing his arms was easier, now, and he was able to summon one of his samurai weapons in each of his hands. Now that he mastered them a little better, he tried to fight with all four at the same time, but he constantly found himself knocked by his own weapons. Fighting with four blades was edgy at best, and he thanked his good star that he'd learnt to solidify his skin so early in his life.

His workout done, he retracted his additional arms and returned to Hogwarts. Because of his trip to Venice, he had skipped dinner, and, despite what Goken had offered, he was still hungry. Hungry and

exhausted. However, all thoughts of eating disappeared from his mind when he noticed the presence in his quarters.

Nicholas Flamel was sitting in one of his chairs, smoking a pipe, and had been reading a book. When Harry had crossed the wall to his apartment, the man had looked up and closed the book.

Still in the gaseous reality, Harry recoiled and started to turn back, when he noticed something strange: the man was looking at him.

But it wasn't possible, right? He was invisible, and intangible as well... and Nicholas Flamel was looking straight at him. Flamel's next words brought home to Harry the fact that the old alchemist knew much more than his counterparts.

"I want to talk to you, Harry."

'Damn.'

The old man was now standing, waiting politely. Harry continued to draw back, the man's eyes still boring through his own. "I will be offended if you leave, Mr Potter. I might even cast an anti-Apparation field to force you to appear."

Harry sighed. His friends had told him about the man, and he knew he was someone who kept his word, in niceties and in threats. After raising every shield he could think of, mental and physical, he Apparated in.

"So nice of you to gratify me of your presence." the man said, before gesturing to the empty table. "Tea?"

"Yes, plea-" Harry started, before stopping, startled at the facility with which the man had conjured an elaborated tea set with amber liquid steaming from china cups and a few scones on the side. "Wow."

“I took the liberty of casting several privacy spells on the room, and a locking spell on the door.” Flamel said. “I know you aren’t fond of others knowing your little secret.”

Harry almost snorted, but a glance from the old man prevented this, and he coughed instead. After recovering, he addressed him. “What was so important that you had to invade my quarters?”

“You. Me. The world. Voldemort. Take a pick.” the man answered sternly, before sipping his tea. ‘And don’t take that tone with me, young man.’ he added, sending this directly to Harry’s mind.

“Alright, then.” Harry said, sitting back and forcefully pushing his tiredness away. He knew he could stay awake for a very long time, that way, even if he would have to sleep for even longer afterwards – but he had a Time Turner, after all. “Since you appeared here uninvited, let’s start by you.”

“What do you want to know?”

“How can I be sure that you really are Nicholas Flamel? How you know about me? And how you... saw me, right... before?”

“To your first question, there are numerous answers, but you can rest assured that I never lie. I am Nicholas Flamel, the 666 years old alchemist.”

“666 years? That reminds me of something...”

“The number of the beast?” the man smiled. “Another invention to deal with weak-willed individuals. My friend Michel was fond of such things, before he went into a Divination spree... well, of course, you don’t know him. Michel of Nostre Dame? Nostradamus?”

Harry shook his head, the name not having reached his ears before. His attention was still on the man’s age, too. “You must be the oldest man on earth!” he exclaimed, awe in his voice.

Flamel frowned. "I am not, but I will not discuss about that issue right now. To your second question, my answer will be that I collected numerous clues over the last few days I spent at Hogwarts."

"But I've not... err..."

"Yes, you have not sought my presence. But I do not care. I just sought yours."

"Uh. Alright, then. Why?"

"You asked me three questions, young man, and I will answer them in the correct order before you will allow me to ask three questions. Understood?"

"Yes. Sorry, sir."

"To answer your third question, I only have to inform you that you are not the only one able to feel the others around you. You are quite a brute at it, though." the man started, not stopping when Harry tried to interrupt him. "You expand your senses without taking into account the fact that other similar people might be around." Once again, Harry tried to disrupt the man's talk, but to no avail. "I know you have seldom met people able enough, but your numerous talents need to be refined. That is why I am here. Now, my turn: are you intending to follow the prophecy and kill Voldemort? How? When? And why were you avoiding me?"

Harry stayed there, open-mouthed at the man's words and their implication.

"Dumbledore..." he whispered, a vague anger starting to rise in his heart.

"Albus does not know I know. He always had a soft spot for several things, and not hiding his thoughts all the time is one of those. But I am sure you know about this already."

Harry noticed the man's expression and knew he had to answer the questions. "First question: I don't know. Aren't prophecies made to predict the future? If not, I could leave Voldemort to someone else, but, since I found the prophecy, I've always thought I'd be going against him, so... yes. Who else? As to how and when, I don't really know. I'm teaching fighting clubs here, but it's also for me to learn what strategies might work better in battle. And I avoided you because I somehow sensed your power, sir, and I was afraid."

"My power?" the man replied. "Were you not afraid that I would claim your wand? And, yes, I do know it is yours, now. You bought it, so it is yours."

"It was that at first, sir, but, as you put it, I "brutally" sensed magic around me once, and felt your true power."

"My true power?" Flamel answered, and Harry looked at him, surprised at the change of voice. The man was clearly surprised, but he recovered quickly, and became thoughtful. "Giving your power a value of 100, what score would you give mine?"

Harry thought about it for a moment before answering. "1500, sir." he said in a little voice.

Flamel smiled. "Good. Very good." he said, before sipping his tea.

"Sir? Why aren't you fighting, then? I mean... since you are so knowledgeable and powerful, you must be quite invincible on the battlefield... right? You could take care of Voldemort, were it not for that prophecy."

"You are wrong. Nobody is invincible." Flamel answered. "For your information, contrarily to what a few drama-prone people might think, prophecies have never dictated the future. They are merely guidelines. A man, a long time ago, made a prophecy about a town being destroyed. Nineveh, I think it was called. The town council met to think about it, and they decided to stop mining underneath the town because that was purely caused by greed and it demeaned the slaves' condition. Thus they unknowingly saved their town from

destruction. Now, what would have happened if the prophecy hadn't been made?"

"The town would have been destroyed."

"You see? The prophecy was never accomplished, but it helped solve their problem."

"So that means you could help the wizarding world against Voldemort, right?"

"That's where you are wrong. I can not. I did not say that I did not want to, but I am not allowed to."

"Not allowed?"

Despite the privacy charms in place, Flamel looked around, before leaning towards Harry as if to share an important secret. "My master does not want me to."

"Your master? But... who can it be?" asked Harry. Now that he was on speaking terms with Flamel, he imagined that he could speak to his master as well, and possibly reason him.

Flamel smiled. "You hide your thoughts well, but I still hear them, young man. I can not tell you the name of my master, yet. Sit back, now, and I will tell you a little story. It is not something that is taught in History of Magic, but know that it is the truth.

"A long time ago, centuries before the Founding of Hogwarts, one particular wizard wanted to learn everything that was possible to learn about magic. In doing so, he also drew around him a cohort of people wanting to learn. Some wanted to learn magic for greed, others for power, and others for enlightenment. Those who learnt for greed didn't know how to battle, and were killed by the people they stole from. Those who wanted power got it, but they didn't know how to transmit that knowledge to their descendants, thus creating fleeting kingdoms. Only remained those who wanted to learn for the pleasure of enlightening their mind, and they followed their leader around the

world, learning to respect their environment at the same time. These were called the Enlightened.

“However, in the group of scholars, a particular witch wasn’t agreeing with the peaceful views of the leader, and, when she noticed that the power-hungry followers were cast out, she bid her time. She did so well in learning that she only came second to the master himself, and started to take lessons directly from him. That sparked a romance between the two, but the heart of the lady was already darkened. In the aftermath of their first intercourse, she took advantage of the man’s drowsy countenance to cast the most powerful imprisonment charm she knew of – she had just learnt it. She then fled from the Enlightened, deciding to build her kingdom on earth, a kingdom which she called Umbra, an appropriate name. It started a dark era which only ended when the remaining Enlightened scholars pooled their power to Vanish her whole castle. Few of them survived.

“They thought their leader gone, but he was not. The prison spell was a wicked one: it was designed to take its power from the magic of the victim, and it was keeping said victim alive as much as possible. The man was very powerful, and, consequently, the prison kept him safely in place.

“Despite allowing sound and light to pass through, it was hidden behind other spells, and no one spoke to the old man for centuries. He was alone and forgotten, but never grew annoyed. He was constantly learning new things about magic, and, when two young boys and two young girls found his hiding place by accident, he taught them numerous things.

“These four were stunned by the amount of knowledge they received, and forgot to mark the path back to the hidden cave. They never came back. Instead, they built a castle and focused on transmitting what they learnt to the younger generations. Hogwarts.”

Flamel’s eyes had a faraway look, and Harry didn’t dare interrupting the recounting.

“It took a great deal of research to find the place, believe me. Once there, Merlin taught me numerous things. I taught others as well, and we all continue to do so, in a never-ending cycle of learning. However, in order to prevent what had happened with Nimue, each of us took an oath of non-violence.” Flamel’s eyes recovered focus, and he looked at Harry. “I could fight, Harry, but the first offensive spell cast would take my magic and my life away. In short, I can’t take another human life. But we can help you.”

“Why did you tell me all this?” Harry asked. “I mean... it’s really interesting, but... wait a second... you said... Merlin?”

Flamel nodded.

“And...” Harry processed what the man had said. “He’s alive?”

Another nod.

A pause. “Wow.” Another pause. “Wicked!”

“There is more, Harry.” Flamel continued. “Merlin had, over the centuries, perfected his link with magic, and he knows everything that happens in the world. He could escape his prison, now, but it is now the only thing that maintains him alive, so he can’t. He felt you, Harry, and he pushed a bit of his knowledge towards you, a few times over the years.”

Harry nodded, dumbfounded at the implications of all this.

“The reason why I told you all this is because we need your help.”

“Sorry? You need my help? What for?”

“You do remember we all took an oath of non-violence, yes? Merlin felt the threat represented by Voldemort, and he wants that particular menace to be stopped. He accepts to bend the rules a little bit, so that you could enter our group and still fight. He knows your heart is pure despite the trials life heaped on you.”

Harry was flabbergasted. Here was a legendary man, here was a man who was much more powerful than he was, and that man was asking him for help! "What's the group's name, now?" he asked absentmindedly.

"It's still the Enlightened, although it could be said in other languages. Some have called us the Keepers of Knowledge, and, wanting to copy our successes, other societies have been created with knowledge being their goal. I remember, when I was young, my parents told me about muggles powers in place persecuting such groups, like the Templars. It is one of the reasons why I don't normally advertise about myself. To this day, I seem to have chosen the proper path, since I'm still alive."

"People know about the Philosopher's Stone, though."

"That's a red herring. The Elixir of Life is not hand made. It simply can not. When you have time, after defeating Voldemort, I will be able to tell you more, but not now."

"And who's in?"

Flamel smiled. "Less than a dozen wizards and witches. Because of our oath, we tend to keep to ourselves. Shields only last that long, you know. You don't know any of the other members. Yes," he smiled, "that means that Dumbledore isn't in. Neither is Voldemort, despite the fact that he wanted to. He apprenticed under my Russian counterpart but, when he learnt about the oath, he attacked his master by surprise, bound him, and tried to extract all his knowledge. It's thankful he didn't succeed."

"What happened?"

"Mikhail committed suicide: he cast an attack spell."

A long pause.

Harry thought about it, but there wasn't a doubt in his mind. After a minute, he nodded resolutely. "Alright. I will need everything I can

learn to defeat Voldemort, especially with Malfoy and Lestrange in their current state. I'm ready to take courses with Merlin himself, if needed."

Flamel smiled. "You won't. Few can discuss with Merlin, nowadays. His speech patterns have evolved over time. You will need to spend some time as my apprentice, first. But don't worry, you will meet him someday."

"Your... apprentice? Like Dumbledore? But..."

"When a master in several trades takes an apprentice, it can be in either of these trades. Albus was young and he had a primary interest in alchemy. In your case, I know you need more than that. And, I may not be able to use them, but I know a good deal of battle spells."

Harry gulped. "I'd be honoured, sir."

Now that Harry was – unofficially, yet – Flamel's apprentice, the two of them were seen together more often. The old alchemist even took the habit of going to the magical duelling club to observe and comment – it wasn't because he couldn't fight that he didn't have something to say. At one point, the old man even made a couple comments on Harry's own duelling stances. These were slightly unfavourable comments, and two Slytherins had the misfortune of thinking that their professor had mollified somewhat. When they tried to take advantage of it, though, they found themselves devoid of mouth for the rest of the period – Transfiguration was really efficient to shut someone up.

Most of the time, Harry's courses went pretty well. He continued to build on what Remus and Sirius had done the previous years, and the students respected him, even if he continued to mark one of them at each period. After a month doing so, his "surprise attacks" had been repelled only eleven times, and, these eleven times, his second attempt had always struck home – he had warned them that he'd continue until one of them was marked.

The clubs went well, too. There were a surprisingly high number of students wanting to participate to the first two clubs of the week, but it

was a split participation. The magical duelling club's attendance was mostly purebloods wanting to make good use of what they already knew, while the unarmed fighting brought most muggleborns, a large part of which having practised some kind of martial art before. These two clubs were such a success that Harry had to split them in two: after having tested the students on their first meeting, he used the second Defence classroom to hold those who were there more to show off their skills rather than to learn. Several teachers agreed to take part in the clubs as well, and there was always at least one of them to manage the second classroom.

Since there were not that many students taking both clubs, there were few members attending the more complicated ones, to the point of only having eight members to the Saturday club – and six of those were Harry's friends. Harry didn't want the clubs to be just a place where people can show off. He wanted them to realize that there were many ways of fighting and surviving. He started jostling down ideas about how to do that, and it was beginning to acquire form.

During that first month of school, Harry also realized something: as a Professor, he had numerous interesting conversations with the other teachers, especially with Flamel, but he also had fewer interactions with his friends, and he disliked that. Like with his clubs, he had started to find ideas about that: for instance, he had helped to organize a little party for Hermione's birthday. It had been held in the inter-house Games Room, in order to bring friends from all Houses, and it finished in his quarters with his closest friends. Aside from this one occurrence, though, he had seldom seen his friends as friends and not as students. Tracey helped him deal with it, and the two of them spent an hour or so each evening, talking about the days, about people and other things.

Something happened, though, which would change all this.

It started on a Wednesday evening, ten days after Hermione's birthday. Harry entered the Great Hall for dinner, and found that it was rather empty. There were fewer students than usual, and the only teachers there were those not belonging to the Order of the Phoenix. Putting two and two together, Harry briefly checked with

Cassie for Dumbledore's location, before hurrying, on foot, towards the Headmaster's office.

Truth be told, the room contained all the teachers who were Order members as well, except one: Professor Sinistra wasn't a member, and she was sitting on a chair in front of Moody and Dumbledore, the former apparently conducting a Veritaserum-induced enquiry.

"Do you know where the missing students are?"

"Yes."

"Where are they?"

"Somewhere safe."

"Where is that?"

"Huh?"

It was known that the Veritaserum, by putting the conscious mind to sleep, was forcing the interrogator to use simple questions. Sinistra not having understood Moody's question, Dumbledore repeated it.

"Where is the place where the missing students are?"

"In Hogwarts."

"In which part of Hogwarts is the place where the missing students are?"

"Under... underwater." Sinistra said, visibly struggling against the potion.

"Underwater?" exclaimed Sprout. "Stop this nonsense, woman! Where are they?"

"Somewhere safe." was the only answer she'd got.

“I don’t think we can get more than that.” Moody said. “But we can negotiate by using her trial if she’s a Death Eater. You have your pensieve?”

At Dumbledore’s nod, the old Auror turned back to the accused. “Are you a Death Eater?”

Sinistra didn’t answer, and she started to shake uncontrollably.

“Albus!” McGonagall called. “What is happening to her?”

“Either she fights it, or she has conflicting memories.” Dumbledore answered. “Can we stop there?” he asked Moody, who shook his head.

“Either we stun her, or we wait for the truth serum to stop acting.” he said, before glancing at the struggling woman with a thoughtful frown. “I saw that before!” he exclaimed suddenly. “She Obliviated herself! That’s why she fights the serum! Stupefy!”

Professor Sinistra recoiled in her chair and toppled backwards, her fall sending her crashing into some members’ legs, and they stepped back. When they noticed the woman’s tortured expression, many of them gasped.

Harry didn’t. He was busy trying to enter her mind, but he only found rubble. As if her whole mind had collapsed. Deciding that it wouldn’t be productive to lose his own consciousness in the rubble of another person’s mind, he looked around and asked the question that burned his lips. “What’s happening?”

“A raven sent me a message from Voldemort.” Dumbledore said, before sighing when still a few people gasped as he uttered the name. “The message tells us that twelve muggleborn students are going to die today. The Heads of House already counted and found the names of these students. My... I don’t find the students with any of my usual trinkets, but that doesn’t mean that they aren’t there. Most likely, they are somewhere, hidden behind a Confundus charm.” Dumbledore

paused for a second, before continuing. "As soon as the message had arrived, I contacted Mad-Eye and we interrogated Sinistra, because she's certainly the one to have done so. In fact, what she told us reflects this. But she can't answer, now." He paused for several seconds, before looking at the assembled teachers apologetically. "I'm sorry about that. I should have locked her better."

"Let's focus on the students, for now." McGonagall said. "That's the important question: where they are."

"And why today?" Harry mused. At this, the others looked at him inquiringly, but he was still addressing the Headmaster. "I mean... it's not an important date for Voldemort, and, unless I'm wrong, there's no particular magical ritual requiring the 29th of September to be completed at... unless they require the full moon."

"Why, indeed." Dumbledore mused, before looking at the teachers with a resolute expression. "Alright, let's do this. We will organize search parties for them. Minerva, Filius, Pomona, you know what to do. Small teams, with capable teachers or prefect heading them. And you can take her to the Hospital Wing, too." he said, nodding at the prone form of Professor Sinistra. "Alastor, if you can look around the Ministry to see if any dark activity happens, we never know and Henry raised a valid question."

Harry was thinking of ways to help the search parties, and he found one quickly. "Sir? If you call Remus Lupin and Sirius Black, they could help. They are Animagi, aren't they? With canine sense of smell, and all..."

"Good thinking, lad!" Moody exclaimed, before looking at Dumbledore. "I will be back." he said, before disappearing through the Floo.

Harry was next at the fireplace, requesting Remus and Sirius. They answered quickly, and, despite their tired state, they agreed to help and came through the Floo as well.

"Henry." Dumbledore called, before dismissing everyone else.

When only the two of them were there, Dumbledore looked at him for a second, before speaking. "This castle is large, and the search will take a long time."

"Albus?" Harry asked, not seeing where that was headed.

"However, the school contains numerous secret passages, and there's one only a few people can open. I know you are in contact with Jerry Homest. Can you tell him to come here to open the Chamber of Secrets?"

Harry frowned, giving all the impression of debating the question. "It's not that I don't want to, Albus, but Jerry is very secretive, and I'm not sure to be able to actually reach him. Generally, it's the other way around." he looked around, and his gaze fell on Fawkes, who looked back at him before trilling a soft sound.

"I'll do it, young speaker. Just give me some message and I'll flash to your quarters."

Harry nodded, as if he was thinking to himself – which he was, in a way: he was wondering how some people and creatures seemed to know so much about his life. "Can I use your phoenix, Albus? At least, if he doesn't find Jerry, he will be quicker to come back."

"Go ahead."

Harry wrote a short message and gave it to Fawkes, who disappeared. "Was there something else you wanted to talk to me about, Albus?"

"No, thank you. You should join a search team, now. I will stay here for a few minutes. I have to place a few firecalls."

Harry nodded and left the room. As soon as he was out of sight, he Apparated to his quarters, where he found the regal bird waiting for him with a twinkle of his own in the eyes. Harry scribbled a quick answer for Dumbledore and gave it to the proud bird. "See you later,

Fawkes.” he said, patting the bird’s head. “Feel free to have a chat here someday.”

The phoenix nodded, before disappearing in a ball of flames. Harry then sat on his bed and concentrated. Twelve students. Nobody had told him their names, and he had forgotten to ask. Hoping that they were fine, he contacted his friends, one after the other. Most of them answered at once. Ginny didn’t.

He tried to force more power in reaching the girl, and finally got the start of an answer, but it was very faint. However, through the frail connection, she managed to send him what she was seeing, and Harry knew she was in trouble. He also knew that the Headmaster’s instincts were accurate as ever.

He Apparated to the Chamber of Secrets and immediately noticed the hole in its ceiling and the water coming from it and slowly filling the room. He had already supposed that the Chamber was under the lake because of the damp environment the large room bathed in, but this was a proof.

A quick and focused repairing charm later, the ceiling was whole again, and hole was no more. Harry took a minute, then, to make sure that all the students were alive and well despite being out cold.

They all were.

The six of them.

Harry frowned. Where were the other six?

As the students were still unconscious, he had no qualm Apparating out, and he used his greater speed to search the numerous corridors around the Chamber. He only found five students, there, and he brought them with the others. After positioning them close to each other to keep themselves warm, he returned to his apartment, where he quickly morphed into his moustached alter ego. "Quickly" here meant that he kept his steel arm, only hiding it in a long sleeved outfit with gloves. Once ready, he Apparated outside, near Hagrid’s hut, before heading towards the castle. As he was walking towards the

castle entrance, he became aware of two things: the Headmaster was waiting for him there, his gaze resting on him; and there was someone atop the Astronomy tower. Someone standing on the battlement, waving with the evening's cold breeze.

Harry stopped, and tried to see who it was. However, as he was doing so, the figure seemed to falter for a second, before toppling over, plunging towards a certain death.

Not caring anymore if Dumbledore watched, Harry Apparated out quickly and hurled himself through space, the forcefully displaced air making a twin bang in the castle's still atmosphere. His trajectory was made to intersect the falling person, and he caught said person deftly, before noticing a few things: it was the Head Girl; and she was naked. Several runes were visible on her body – Harry would later learn that these were simple runes which disposition reinforced will-suppressing spells.

His own body started to react strangely – well, not that strangely, but he hadn't touched a naked female before – and he almost dropped her in shock, before noticing that she was almost blue from the cold, and shivering uncontrollably. He took a handkerchief from his belt and transfigured it into a robe which he slipped over her head. After applying a warming charm on said robes, he left her to the care of Professor Sprout, who had just arrived with her search team. She left, the students following her. As he was waiting for Dumbledore, Harry caught two of them, obviously muggle, wondering if a jet had passed the sound barrier near Hogwarts.

Dumbledore arrived from where Sprout had left, having obviously discussed with her about the Head Girl. "Good morning, Jerry."

"We will see if it is good when all the students will be found." Harry answered. "Was she one of them?"

The old man nodded, and Harry grinned in the privacy of his own mind. He broke into a decided walk, Dumbledore falling in step behind him. The two of them soon arrived in front of the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets.

“Open.” Harry hissed, and the sinks separated noisily.

The racket brought the local ghost, and Moaning Myrtle looked at the two of them inquiringly. When she noticed that the entrance was open, though, she cried and hurled herself through the toilet stalls. A few seconds later, she could be heard complaining about boys entering a girls’ bathroom.

“That was Moaning Myrtle.” Dumbledore deadpanned, as a matter of explanation.

Harry nodded, and jumped in the hole. After waiting for the old man to come through, he led him towards the Chamber again.

After Levitating the eleven students and themselves out of the Chamber, and after depositing the youngsters in the infirmary, Jerry took his leave – avoiding Dumbledore’s questions – and headed outside, where he Apparated out and turned time again. As he could only turn time hour by hour, he had some time to kill and decided to continue on his current project: bolts. Or, more precisely, anti-werewolf and anti-vampire bolts. He had copied the blue ones – those with a hollow part in them, designed to inject things in targets – and had put a mix of powdered garlic there. What he decided to do now was to transfigure the bolt tip into silver and its body into regular wood: he knew that one of the ways to kill a vampire was to pierce its heart with wood. When it was done, Harry put it in one of the duplicating clips, before changing said clip’s colour to one that wasn’t used yet: pink.

Since it was almost time for him to leave, he jotted down his ideas to create yet another kind of bolt: a morphine-filled one. On paper, he decided for his colour: light blue. He then left his rooms and spent some time in a search party on the far side of the castle, until Dumbledore magically told everyone that the search was over and that everyone was asked to meet in the Great Hall.

“Did Fawkes find Jerry?” Harry asked Dumbledore as he arrived at the Head table.

“It seems so.” Dumbledore answered. “Before arriving, he answered that he’d help me... against his better judgement.”

Harry smiled. “Yeah. Sounds like him.”

Dumbledore nodded. “I will have to ask you about him, later.”

Harry nodded briefly and went to his seat. Seeing that almost everyone was there, Dumbledore stood up and addressed the room. After reassuring them about the fate of the twelve missing students, he told them a story about Death Eaters putting Professor Sinistra under Imperius and using her to kidnap said students before harming herself in some unknown way.

Dumbledore then sat to eat, observing the hall through his half-moon glasses. After a few minutes, he noticed some students leaving without waiting for dessert. He mentally checked the name of those students against a list of names he had received two weeks before, and he smiled grimly while congratulating himself for having activated a very special ward around Hogwarts – a ward which would yield results quite rapidly, too.

After dinner, Dumbledore stood up and looked around. His eye caught sight of several members of the Order of the Phoenix, and he discreetly played with his Phoenix ring while nodding at them. They understood, and arrived in his office a short time later.

There were two owls there, and another one entered while they were taking conjured seats. The three birds looked confused, and Dumbledore explained.

“When the alert started, I activated the communication ward. Any owl coming to Hogwarts, or intending to leave, will pass here first.” he said, taking the letter from one of the owls. A couple of spells later, the letter was opened and the old man was browsing it.

“Albus!” McGonagall exclaimed. “That’s a breach of privacy!”

“I have to, Minerva. I have a list of students I know would like to be Death Eaters, and others who are in every aspect except the Mark. I will use these owls as proof to confound them and show them the error in their ways.” He sighed, and pinched the bridge of his nose. “If you want, we can devise other ways of ensuring the school’s safety. I am responsible for this, though, which means that I’ll be eternally shameful about not having done something for Sinistra before.”

The group worked for a couple hours on the letters and on safety procedures, and they confirmed a couple of students’ names from the list he had received from Harry, two weeks ago. Reading between the lines, they also found out that one of the seventh year girls was pregnant, and that a group of fifth year Slytherin boys were bullying the younger students.

Dumbledore sat down and, removing his glasses, he rubbed his face. “Well... I guess it has been an eventful evening, and I thank you for your cooperation in searching for the students.”

“I’m glad you found them.” Flitwick said, before acquiring a pensive look. “You didn’t tell us where they were.”

“In the Chamber of Secrets.” the old man replied, earning him a couple of gasps. “Well, except for our Head Girl. It seems that she discovered Sinistra’s plans and was put under Imperius.”

“How did you get into the... Chamber? I thought you said only Parselmouths could open it.” asked Flitwick. “And, for that matter, how did she?” he added, referring to the Astronomy teacher.

“I made the mistake of leaving her in the possession of her communication mirror.” Dumbledore answered. “It might have been any Parselmouth speaking behind it. And, as to how I entered... some of you remember seeing Jerry Homest in the castle? He opened it for me. Seems that he knows Parseltongue, too. Which reminds me...” he trailed off, looking straight at Harry. “How could you reach him so fast, Henry, while I didn’t succeed? And don’t tell me it’s only thanks to Fawkes, because I tried too.”

“I don’t know, Albus. I know I thought very hard about where he lives when I gave the message to Fawkes. Perhaps that worked that way.”

“Hmmm... could be.” Dumbledore replied, absently stroking his beard while eyeing Harry speculatively. “Can you tell us where he lives?”

“I’m sorry, but I’m not allowed to.”

“Not allowed to? What do you mean?”

“As I told you a long time ago, I vowed to respect my masters’ wishes, and Jerry is one of them. He taught me much about muggle weapons.”

“Still, I’m concerned, Henry. Jerry Homest may be truthful in his articles and helpful when he fights against our enemy, but he is an unknown quantity to us.”

“Not to me.” Harry answered staunchly. “I think that you are too curious about him, Headmaster. Out of loyalty to you, I won’t tell him about this, but know that he values his privacy above everything. Merely knowing that you want to reach him may alienate him to you.”

“Still... he is also the only one who had approached Harry Potter successfully.” Dumbledore said, although he seemed deflated somewhat. “I tried, once, but the boy escaped.” he admitted, and a couple of persons gasped. The old man chuckled. “Yes, he escaped me, and Jerry told me he taught the boy a few tricks. I don’t want Harry Potter to be the unknown quantity Jerry is!” he exclaimed.

“Why?” asked Harry innocently. “Why is that boy so important?”

“He’s...” Dumbledore started, before looking around. “He defeated Voldemort, a dozen years ago. Surely, you know about this.”

“Of course! It was in every newspaper.” Harry said, before frowning. “I still find it strange that the articles telling of the attack were so precise. It implies that there were witnesses. Witnesses who didn’t help the Potters.” he finished, looking straight at the Headmaster.

The room fell utterly silent while everyone considered the young man’s reasoning.

Dumbledore opened his mouth to say something, but two events prevented him to.

The fireplace glowed a vivid green and Moody shot through it. “Albus!” he exclaimed. “There’s-”

He was interrupted by the office door opening, letting Flamel enter. “Don’t say a word!” he said to Moody.

Everyone looked at the old alchemist questioningly, but he was completely unfazed. “I need to speak to... Henry.” he said. “Privately, and possibly for a long time. Albus?”

Harry looked at the three oldest men in the room in rapid succession. Something was afoot, there, and he didn’t know what it was. However, he knew that his current master was the most knowledgeable of the three, and, not waiting for Dumbledore’s dismissal, he stood up and followed Flamel out of the office.

When the door closed, Moody growled at Dumbledore. “What’s the meaning of this?”

“I don’t know, Alastor. What did you want to tell me?”

“You do know that our Ministry still manages magic in most of the countries belonging to the old Commonwealth Empire, right?” Moody asked, and almost everyone nodded. “Well... there has been a surge of magic in India.”

“What kind of surge?” Dumbledore asked.

“You know the detectors, Albus. The most powerful spell cast by a regular wizard or witch reaches 100 on its scale. When you duelled Grindewald, they reached a peak at 1000.”

“So?”

“The detector exploded five minutes ago, Albus. Right after reaching 10000.”

Everyone blanched.

The clock on the mantelpiece softly chimed. It was 10:30pm.
Outside of the Headmaster’s office...

“Why did you get me out now?” Harry asked.

“I waited out of the door for the best moment to do so.” Flamel answered. “Come with me.”

Harry followed the man wordlessly, and soon realized that they were going to his quarters. He didn’t question his master, but the answer he had received was confusing at best.

“Please, sit down.” the man said once they were both in the small apartment.

Harry obeyed and noticed that the ancient man in front of him didn’t seem in a hurry that much. Why was it so urgent that he needed him out right then? And why was he taking all the time in the world?

“Tea?” asked Flamel.

Harry decided to play along. After all, the old man was his master.
“Yes, please.”

They both sipped their tea in silence, before Flamel spoke again. “We have a problem. A big one.”

“What is it?” Harry asked, suddenly all ears.

“I spoke with Merlin recently. He is so much in contact with the magic that he felt something happen, and we need you to play interference.”

“What is it?”

“Demons have been awakened.”

“Demons?”

“Yes, plural, as in "more than one". Not even two, in fact. There are four of them.”

“Four?”

“Yes, four. And there’s only one person able to fight them, at the moment.”

“...me?” Harry asked, a little uncertain. After all, he had fought werewolves, all right, but... demons?

“I knew you were sharp when I took you under my wing.” Flamel smirked. Harry snorted and started to reply but Flamel interrupted him. “You already fought two of them.”

That sent Harry into a reminiscing loop until he remembered two particularly vicious Death Eaters. Vicious, and apparently immortal. Malfoy and Lestrangle.

“There are two more?” he asked in a little voice. He then grimaced at his tone of voice, coughed, and asked “Can they even be killed?”

“Well... not really. Let’s just say that their host can be killed upon which their immortal soul returns to Hell. But it’s the same, really. It’s just that they give their hosts temporary access to their powers, and

that's... quite bothersome." He smirked. "Nothing a beheading can't solve, though."

"Great, then! I'll take care of them."

"Good! Now, prepare yourself for a tough battle. You told me you were going to make special ammunition, earlier. Have you?"

"Yes. Garlic and silver." Harry nodded proudly, before obeying the man's suggestion.

He stood up and went to one of his cupboards. It was one with an included table, and he pulled his box of Samurai weapons out and atop it. He also took his two crossbows – Flitwick's duplication charms were really useful – and put them near the displayed blades. The next item he took out was the shield he got from the Venetian knighthood. After willing his Venetian mantle – which was currently looking like Hogwarts teacher's robes – to disappear, he undressed himself, down to his underwear, and equipped the dragon hide trousers, vest, and boots he had bought just for the occasion. He then willed his mask to appear and his mantle to morph into a cape.

Harry looked around, before taking his most powerful spellcasting focuses out: these were Merlin's wand; his mahogany-and-Nundu one; and his katana ring. And he started casting spells.

He started with shields, and cast the same shielding Charm with the three "wands", ensuring that it was very unlikely that it would be dispelled. The first one was a reflecting shield, which he put on all his blades, his shield, and his mantle, knowing that it would at least get a few enemies that way. He then cast another shield on his body. It was a shielding spell Flamel had taught him. The old alchemist was perhaps forbidden to act aggressively, but his continued life proved that he knew spells to protect himself. That particular shield absorbed the spells thrown at it, and used the spells' power to heal the recipient.

His last spell was a Disillusionment charm he threw on himself. Since they had blended with the mask, he didn't need sticking charms on his magical glasses, nor did he need it on his weapons: the Samurai

paraphernalia was his, and the crossbows were charmed in the same way already.

His spellwork done, Harry concentrated on his body. He remembered Lestranger's size, and contemplated being larger to have a better chance of striking him down – being bigger meant stronger and harder physical attacks. However, he knew that a larger person made an easier target, and he dismissed this option, his adult shape being large enough – any larger, and he would have to adapt to it. He concentrated for several minutes, and his additional arms slowly expanded from his armpits. He flexed them for a few seconds, before concentrating on raising his skin toughness.

His last target for enhancements was his mind. He unplugged his pain connection first, and then, after clearing his mind of all mundane thoughts not related to fighting, he activated his chameleon ability. Knowing that there would be possible Legilimens in the enemy ranks, he also made sure that his mind defences were ready.

Given that he had had to repeat several hours a day for a month, Harry knew how to use the Time Turner proficiently. Thus, in order to be able to sort himself, he had chosen to use it to repeat the whole day several times, so that he would get his night's rest at the appropriate time. The extra time was spent in training different things, and his mind was no exception. He still had a few things to sort in his life, but things like the collection of dark artefacts from Malfoy Manor seemed less important than his continued life.

And it involved protecting his mind.

His first step had been to build a thick metallic sphere around his entire mind – including the subterranean part and a good deal of the still-empty sky: he didn't want intruders to jump above his defences, nor did he want them to access his subterranean mind by digging. He had also rediscovered his pensieve and had taken advantage of it to remove useless memories from his mind. He had implemented several of his ideas concerning his mind, like an index of the removed memories. He thus knew where to find them, but they weren't taking that much space in his mind anymore. A few days after doing so, he

had talked with Jorg and James, and the two of them had described the mechanism as akin to the cache system of modern computers.

Between the sphere and the outer reaches of his mind, he had put mud, hopefully slowing any intruder's progress. Next came the four dragons defending his mind. The flying creatures were patrolling their space relentlessly, ready to catch any intruder. There was an improvement when you compared these dragons with the first he had used, though: the current ones were fitted with a surprise for any intruder fool enough to attack them. Or him.

Now that his mind was ready too, he took his equipment. He removed his belt and took another one – once again mentally thanking the Charms professor for having taught him the duplicating charm. That other belt contained different things than the first: each of its pockets was enchanted with the same duplicating charm, and they contained clips for his crossbows. He took two of them out – the pink one and the explosive orange one – and paused.

He looked at Flamel. “Will there be many opponents?”

“Merlin knows.”

Harry smirked. “Riiight. And what did he say?”

The alchemist looked at him with an amused expression. “He said that you were to fight five times, and that the order was important. Interpret this as you wish.”

Harry paused, looking thoughtfully at the explosive ammunition for a few seconds. He could cause much collateral damage with this, and he wasn't sure it was the best one to use. Shrugging, he put it back in the belt and took out a red one, figuring that making the enemies bleed to death was another option he could take. After attaching the pink and red ammunition clips to his crossbows, he paused again.

“How can I be sure the demons are dead? After all, I did put my blade through Malfoy's heart, last time, and he still lives.”

“They can regenerate, so they have to be obliterated. Here.” the man answered, giving him a vial full of powder. It was an orange powder swirling angrily, and Harry looked at it for a moment. “This is living fire.” Flamel continued. “Just spray it over a demon’s body and it will be completely consumed. You have to kill it through mundane means before, though. As I said earlier, cutting its head is an efficient way to do so.”

Harry nodded, and pocketed the vial. This done, he took one crossbow in each of his "secondary" hands and attached the Venetian shield on his left forearm. Merlin’s wand and his mahogany one were stored in Summoning-safe wrist holders, one on each of his secondary arms, and Ravenclaw’s ring was firmly attached to his left – he couldn’t cast spells through his metallic arm, so he had to put the ring on an organic arm, and his right side was already covered with his own ring. He also had his holly wand in his right boot, in case it would be needed.

Lastly, he mentally summoned his tachi – second longest blade of the set – and, the weapon firmly held in his right hand, he turned to his master and looked at him with his mask-blank eyes.

“I’m ready.”

The Alchemist looked at his apprentice apprehensively. His oath of non-violence was pushing him to reject any responsibility in what would happen, but he knew that, if he didn’t send that young man – correction: that killing machine – the death toll would be horrendous. It was going to be dreadful, already, though. Of that he was sure.

He cleared his voice and then addressed Harry. “Alright. Pretty impressive, too. Let me just give you something else.” he said, and removed a pendant from his pocket. “This is charmed as a portkey with a special activation condition. If you fall unconscious, it returns you to safety.”

Harry attached his crossbows to his belt and put the trinket on, hiding it behind his form-fitting vest.

“Great. Now, listen attentively. You will go back one hour in time. No more, no less. Take the location from my mind and go. And be safe, as much as possible. As annoying an apprentice as you are, I never lost one and I don’t intend to start with you.”

Harry nodded, although his movement was almost unseen, between the concealing charm and the chameleon ability. A few seconds "later", he was gone.

“Oh my!” breathed Flamel a bit later. “I forgot to tell him about Voldemort!”

In Egypt, one hour earlier...

‘I think that this is it.’ the man thought, before brushing an annoying lock of red hair behind his ear again.

As he had told Harry, Bill was in Thebes, in the Goblin library precisely, searching for clues about a temple dedicated to Wadjet. He had spent most of the last month like that. Strangely, the most interesting books relative to Wadjet had disappeared from the shelves, and, when he had noticed and told the librarian, the old Goblin had told him that some Goblins might have checked them out.

Bill didn’t think it was a Goblin who had done so, especially since he could make a good guess at who was currently using the temple, probably as living quarters. He couldn’t tell the wizened Goblin, though, and had returned to the endless rows of books, trying to find an alternate path.

Now that he had found the indication he so wanted, though, he didn’t lose time in sending the owl. A short time later, he was watching the bird take off, heading towards Scotland. Once back inside, he ignored the study area and went to the side room to make himself some tea. The Goblin library wasn’t much used, especially by wizards, and Bill had been doing his research alone for quite some time, his tea being his only company.

Several minutes later, a small Goblin approached, wearing the loincloth of an underling. Bill knew the Goblin’s social order and he

knew that the Goblin underlings were quite the same than the house-elves in the wizarding world: efficient workers that no one spoke with. He was reasonably surprised, then, when said Goblin addressed him.

“Not working anymore?”

Despite knowing that it was unusual, Bill's humanity took over and he answered warmly. “No. I found what I wanted, and I'm just warming myself a bit.” he said, before turning to put the now empty cup in the sink.

When the Goblin didn't reply, Bill turned around again, and, noticing that there was no Goblin there, he jumped in alarm. In the Goblin's place, there was a black-robed squat wizard with a white mask. Bill tried to reach his wand, but he didn't stand a chance.

“Stupefy!” the man exclaimed.

At point-blank, the spell struck unerringly, and the redhead fell down, only to be caught by a not-so-gentle hand. It wasn't to help him, though. The two of them disappeared with a slight popping sound just as Goblin voices approached from behind the door. At the same time...

“...and that's why I want to test your powers, and also why I don't want to do so here. I don't want my presence in this country known.” Voldemort said.

The four men stood straight, looking at the Dark Lord with pride in their stance. Voldemort wasn't used to that stance in his followers, and his fingers itched to curse them, but he refrained. These were powerful allies, after all, not mere minions or underlings.

“Here comes the portkey.” he said as a large shape every Death Eater knew as Ursinus Derrick entered the room with a small rope.

Unbeknownst to everyone in England, Derrick wasn't dead. Because of Derrick's management of the department of law enforcement,

Scrimgeour had wanted to interrogate him, and, knowing the Minister, Derrick was sure it involved Veritaserum at one point or another. When he hadn't answered the summon, Aurors had come to investigate his house, and he had collapsed it on them. He had even transfigured a dead muggle into his body before leaving.

He was now second in command in Voldemort's followers, the four "special" ones in front of him having mutated from "follower" into "ally" status.

He wordlessly handed them the rope and backed down, not daring to be caught in the middle of whatever those four would be doing – especially after Death's show when he had "awakened".

"Pleasant trip." Voldemort said, extracted his wand. "I will join you in a few minutes to see how well you are doing." He might not want to be close to the four demons as they wreaked havoc, but he still wanted to see their results with his own eyes.

The Dark Lord tapped the portkey with his wand, and the four men disappeared. Voldemort had chosen to stay back, in order to check on things with Snape. His four allies had started to show signs of restlessness, and they had started to move around the temple, disturbing Jugson's researches and Snape's brewing.

Snape's brewing...

Voldemort slithered down the corridor towards the private chamber he had loaned to Snape for his endeavour, and watched as the Potion Master turned the ladle in a complicated figure, while adding finely powdered ingredients. Snape sensed his master's presence and looked up when he finished his complex task. "It's almost ready, master. One hour, I think."

"Good."

"I have found something else, master, if I may."

Voldemort nodded, indicating that the Potion Master could continue speaking.

“There is something in the potion that involves loyalty. The ingredients are the same than other loyalty-inducing potions, and it seems that your four... allies... are quite loyal to you.”

“It seems so, although they are quite the cheeky ones, aren’t they, Severus?”

“Master, I’m not into their minds, so I wouldn’t know.”

“True, you aren’t there. Don’t forget that ingredient effects can be negated or even reversed.”

“Yes, master.” Snape said, refraining from even thinking of rolling his eyes. He knew this already! He wasn’t Potion Master for nothing.

“I will see about your comment later, Severus.” Voldemort said. “Until then, continue with the potion.”

Voldemort returned to his throne room, and noticed that there were two more men there since he had left to see Snape’s progress. One was one of his Death Eaters – whom his peripheral Legilimency told him was Travers – and the other one was a redhead. Both had their faces to the floor, but, while one was bowing, the other was simply unconscious.

“What is it, Travers?” asked Voldemort, knowing full well that the man was obedient to the point of not speaking first when he knew his lord disliked it.

“You told me to watch over Weasley, master. He just found out what he sought.”

“That means that your own search wasn’t complete, Travers.” Voldemort said in a cold tone. “Crucio!”

He lifted the curse after a second. Travers didn't have time to scream, actually. "This is only a preview, Travers. It is thankful that the man didn't warn anyone about it... He hasn't sent anything, right?"

Travers was afraid of the curse, and, in truth, he hadn't seen Bill sending the owl away, so he didn't know. "No, master." he said, in what he hoped was an affirmed voice. "He didn't send anything."

Voldemort wasn't looking at him at that moment. If he had been, he might have noticed that the man had, in fact, no idea of what he was saying.

"Lock him up." the Dark Lord said. "I will decide his fate later."

Voldemort returned to his quarters, and, after creating the appropriate portkey, he activated it. The internal affairs of the Death Eaters would wait. What he wanted to see now was a scene of death and desolation.

He would be in for a shock.
Killari, Maharashtra, Central India...

When Harry approached, he could already feel the damage from the gaseous reality. He returned to tangibility in the middle of the carnage and looked around. There was no sound nearby, simply bodies upon bodies lying in the streets. Fires were barely lighting the night, coming from small campfires or smouldering buildings. There was a full moon, too, giving the scene an eerie touch.

'Damn Flamel!' Harry thought, starting to be angry at the old man. 'Why didn't he send me before? Why did he have to make his bloody tea! Now that I've seen that, I can't go back to prevent it!'

He tried to follow the trail of destruction, but quickly discovered that there was more than one. As Flamel had said, there were four demons, and, as such, there were four distinct trails. The first one was filled with people visibly dead or dying from spells. What struck him as odd in that street was that there were no children around. He

noticed several small bodies around, but these were wrinkled and parched and he attributed them to very old people.

The second and third trails made his stomach reel. They were filled with bodies as well, but their state was particularly sickening. In one street, these bodies were gouged and dismembered, and there was blood everywhere. In the other, it looked as if the people had been dying of hunger, their bodies so desiccated that it was painful to even look at them. On the fourth trail, he found no evidence of anything used, but, after palpating the first couple of bodies, he quickly found that they were dead. Simply dead.

‘What are those demons?’ he asked himself, before choosing one of the trails. He thought he recognized the work of Malfoy and Lestrangle, and he decided to follow the first of the other two. He Apparated out again and followed his trail until he found the demon moving in the street. His method of killing was... unusual. And frightening. He simply touched his victims, and they went from the state of crying humans to whimpering mummies to corpse in seconds. Harry advanced forward a little and Apparated behind a corner, earning him some gasps from some frightened locals, some of them sounding like "Vishnu" and others like "Kali" – with his mask and arms, he was truly an impressive sight, and it was no wonder that the locals thought they had seen a deity.

He stepped in the street and fired. Despite gaining the creature’s interest, though, he remarked that his bolts didn’t have much effect. On top of that, the demon took his wand out and cast a material shield on himself, and the bolts stopped reaching him altogether. The man then walked towards him.

Deciding not to let himself taken away, Harry Apparated out again, and, once in the gaseous reality, he pocketed the crossbow with the red clip and extracted Merlin’s wand.

He was just there, wondering about what he should do next, when he felt a rush of power near him. He looked from where that came, and noticed that the demon had acquired substance in the gaseous reality. It was as if he had Apparated, but he wasn’t moving.

‘No!’ Harry thought frantically. ‘He can’t do that!’

Unfortunately for Harry, Rookwood had felt that something was off, and he had concentrated on Apparating to the stick-throwing creature, thus landing in the gaseous reality. The Death-Eater-turned-demon slowly opened his eyes, and he noticed Harry looking at him with a stunned expression.

“So... that’s where you hide.” he wheezed, before lunging at him.

Harry jumped out of the way quickly, not wanting to be touched by the desiccating hands. “Who the hell are you?”

The demon stopped to tap his chin thoughtfully. “Hmmm... Perhaps it’s time to learn who will kill you. I am Famine. Although I’m not just creating hunger. I kill with it, too, unlike Death. How prosaic...” he said, before tilting his head to the side. “I have been known as Augustus Rookwood, before. And who are you?”

During his little talk, Rookwood had approached Harry surreptitiously, and he made a sudden dash towards him. Harry knew the rules of travel in the gaseous reality, though, and he was able to escape the attack – although barely – and hurl himself away of Rookwood’s clutches.

Once he was far away and supposedly far enough from the three others as well, he Apparated in, becoming tangible again. He was in a deserted courtyard with a few benches and palm trees, and he just stood there, concentrating on feeling his surroundings.

He knew they would come.

He wasn’t sure if he could feel Rookwood when the demon was in the gaseous reality, but he quickly found out that he could... when the man Apparated just in front of him. Harry reacted automatically and brought his shield to block the attack. His tachi came into action as well and slashed the demon’s skin.

Harry somersaulted backwards while Rookwood was looking at his wound. He then looked up, and Harry gasped. The wound was deep, displaying shrivelled flesh, but it wasn't hindering the demon in the least, and he lunged at Harry again. This time, Harry was a little more ready for the attack, and he swished his blade at the man's outstretched arm, severing it cleanly.

He really didn't want to be touched by these ominous hands.

Speaking of which...

"Incendio." Harry exclaimed, aiming Merlin's wand at the fallen forearm, which burst into flames.

He was ready to repeat the spell on the demon, but said demon growled and attacked again, throwing his whole body at Harry. Rookwood didn't seem to be fazed by Harry's tachi, impaling himself on it in the process. The boy fell on his back, his shield barely preventing the creature's other hand to reach him. His blade was blocked, his crossbow was ineffective, and he knew that the man would follow him to the gaseous reality... there was only one thing he could do.

Using the wand in his hand, he Banished the creature away from him. Since he was lying on his back, Rookwood was catapulted into the sky, arm and legs flailing wildly. Harry knew he had to act fast, because the other demons would have noticed the fight by now, and they were surely closing in. He Apparated atop the still airborne demon and used the Incarceration spell to bind him with strong ropes. He then took hold of one end of these ropes and Apparated back on the ground, next to the charred forearm that hadn't moved.

Harry yanked his tachi from Rookwood's chest – the handle was protruding from the rope-covered body – and positioned himself. The demon understood quickly what was going to happen, and he shrieked.

It was an unholy sound, and Harry had trouble concentrating, but his strong mind forced his body to react, and, in a swift downward strike, Rookwood's head was severed from his body.

Despite the demon being still alive, the scream ceased immediately – with no connection between lungs and voice box, it was quite difficult to speak, after all, so... scream?

Harry breathed a sigh of relief, before hurriedly taking Flamel's vial from his pocket. Not wanting to spend the entire vial on one demon when he had four to deal with, he carefully dropped some powder on the demon's forearm and some more on its head, and was starting to do so for the body when something happened to contradict his plans.

Guided by Rookwood's screech, the three other demons had Apparated, somehow landing behind Harry. Lestrangle had immediately pounced on him, causing both of them to fall on Rookwood's body. The vial of powder was smashed between Harry and Rookwood, and, half a second later, said powder ignited. An angry fire started to devour Rookwood's arm, head, and body... and Harry's.

Despite the intense pain, Harry took advantage of Lestrangle's quick retreat to quickly cast a flame-freezing charm on himself, keeping him safe from the angry fire. Contrarily to a normal fire, though, that one didn't abate, even spreading to his entire body without lowering its strength.

It was really a sight to behold. Harry was standing behind the fallen demon, his four arms outstretched, his mask giving his whole head the appearance of polished alabaster, and his cape flowing in the nightly breeze. And he was covered in angry flames.

Like an enraged animal, Lestrangle crouched and snarled at him. Harry had a good idea about why, though, and he smirked. While regular flame-freezing charms lowered the temperature of the fire on which they were cast, Harry had used it on himself, concentrating enough for the charm to apply only onto him. And the flames were hot, hot like the hell the demons didn't want to return to.

Now that he was calmer, Harry smirked. He aimed his crossbow at Lestrangle and pulled the trigger several times. The demon howled in pain, and quickly removed the offending bolts from his wounds. They

didn't heal as fast as the wounds Harry had inflicted him the last time they saw each other, but they distinctly closed after a few seconds. 'Darn.' Harry thought, and he shot half a dozen bolts at the man before turning to Malfoy.

"Crucio."

The beam impacted on Harry, who... almost flinched. But didn't.

While Malfoy was looking at him in wonder, Harry shot several bolts into his chest, just like he had done to Lestrage. He noticed that the man staggered at each shot, and that a ghostly figure looking like a child's ghost came out each time. But it still didn't kill the demon. Harry groaned. Just how many children had he absorbed? He was continuing shooting the vampire-like demon when he heard something resembling a spell, and he whirled around, ready to defend himself.

But nothing happened.

Harry only noticed that Lestrage had his wand out, and that he was smirking. He smirked back and shot him again, but the bolt smashed against an invisible barrier, and Harry realized that he wasn't the only one to know about shielding spells. At the same time, he heard an incantation behind him, and recognized the same spell. 'So much for the crossbow.' he thought.

While the three of them started to turn around each other, searching for an opening, Dolohov had the most curious reaction. He had kneeled beside the flaming remains of Rookwood, as if he was mourning, and when the magical flame licked the last flammable remains of their fellow demon he wailed. "One half..." was all Harry heard him say before someone else spoke.

That someone else was the second thing contradicting his plans, tonight. The number of Harry's enemies had gone down by one, but they were now four again.

Voldemort was there.

And he looked pissed.

“Crucio!” he hissed at Harry, not quite registering the entire scene.

Once again, Harry felt that he should be writhing in pain, but he had taken care to disengage that particular connection in his mind. And, like Malfoy before him, the Dark Lord looked at his wand in shocked surprise. And he suddenly felt pain.

A bolt had impacted his massive chest. He looked up, only to see another one heading for his shoulder. And he felt pain again. The bolts’ speed was really something to deal with. And that fiery enemy didn’t stop there, two other bolts hitting his body in rapid succession. Voldemort was suddenly thankful for the Egyptian deity to have given him that much more power, as the pointy items didn’t actually pierce his skin. It was still painful, though, and the Dark Lord loathed pain. He aimed his wand at the flaming apparition, a particular curse on his lips.

“Aqueo Conjurus.”

Voldemort had arrived on the scene and he had seen a fiery creature with four arms standing atop one of his allies, in three charred parts and obviously dead. He had obviously thought that if was a fire creature of some sort. He thought his water spell would douse him.

He was almost right.

Besides surrounding Harry completely, the magical fire had other ideas. The blob of water that had appeared around Harry began to boil and turn into vapour so quickly that, following the rules of physics, it exploded outwards, drenching the Dark Lord and the three demons in scalding water.

Thankfully – or not – it did cost the fire all its energy to do so, and a slightly charred humanoid appeared in front of the Dark Lord, who looked at it with eyes as wide as his serpentine face could manage.

“What are you?”

Harry didn't answer – he really wasn't into this kind of monologues like the super-heroes living in his comics – and, hidden behind his shield, he aimed his crossbow carefully.

“I know this crest!” exclaimed the Dark Lord.

‘Uh oh.’ thought Harry. ‘I can't let him make the link with Venice.’ “You can tell me who I stole it from, then.” he said, lowering his shield enticingly. Voldemort's eyes followed the move, and he didn't see the crossbow behind it before it was fired.

A wet sound.

A pained yell.

‘Yes!’ Harry cheered internally, before Apparating out as the Dark Lord was launching spells around in blind fury. Literally.

He had a bolt protruding from his left eye.

Apparently, his enhanced skin didn't apply to the eyes.

Harry took good note of this, remembering to check whether he shared that particular weakness. He suddenly remembered something else, something he had learnt after the incident with the diary and the basilisk. That diary... with Voldemort's spirit... it belonged to someone called Tom Marvolo Riddle.

He appeared on the other side of the demons from Voldemort, and decided to taunt him so that he'd cast spells on them.

“Afraid, Tommy boy?” he taunted.

“Don't call me by this thrice-accursed name! Reducto! Crucio! Avada Kedavra!” Voldemort yelled, aiming at where he had heard the voice. Harry had already Apparated out, though, and the demons quickly followed his idea: after jumping out of the way, they Apparated to a safer location, and only a bench suffered from the

explosion curse. While moving in the gaseous reality, though, one of them stopped, disturbing the usual Apparation spell.

Rodolphus Lestrangle sniffed the air.

His bestial instincts took over, and he opened his eyes to see Harry close to him. And, even if he wasn't familiar with the greyish and smoky reality in which he was now, not caring about the Dark Lord cursing beneath him, he pounced.

Harry wasn't prepared, because he was looking at Voldemort with a grim satisfaction. The wolf-like creature snapped his jaws on his right arm with enough force to snap it.

But it didn't. Harry had come prepared, this time, and his reaction to the beast's attack was only to drop his tachi in shock. An equally shocked wolf-demon retreated from him, looking at where he had struck. Lestrangle's teeth and claws had rent through Harry's dragonhide vest as through paper, but the skin underneath was intact.

The demon had other talents, though, and, when he noticed the fallen sabre, he lunged for it, only to receive a jolt from its handle. Harry was amused from it, and ready to summon his weapon back, but Lestrangle wasn't finished yet. He was a demon of war, after all, and no weapon could resist him. He quickly made gestures over the long blade, using his raw magic to surround the sabre with dark energies. It was made so quickly that, on top of being shocked from not seeing the blade coming back to him, Harry wasn't ready for the next attack.

Lestrangle rushed forward, Harry's tachi in hand, held over his head, and ready to sweep it in a deadly downward strike. Harry had few choices to escape the manoeuvre, except parrying with his shield. Under the mighty blow, though, the beautiful kite shield broke in two, and Harry scuttled back, before... Apparating in.

"Crucio! Sectumsempra! Reducto! Avada Kedavra!"

'Whoops!' Harry thought, couching and jumping to dodge the curse beams from the spells Voldemort was still casting haphazardly

around. He had merely enough time to get rid of the shield's fragments before Lestrangle Apparated in as well, lunging at him again. Harry was farther, though, and he had time to summon his nodachi before making contact with the demon. Lestrangle didn't falter when seeing the longer blade, and he swiped "his" blade in a mighty downward strike.

The two swords clanked, sparks coming from their meeting point and illuminating the courtyard some more. The two swordsmen looked at each other for a second before a stray curse from the still angry Dark Lord forced them to separate.

After a couple of seconds spent looking at each other, they started to fight seriously, and the sound of swordfight echoed in the almost-deserted square. On his side, Lestrangle had an unnatural quickness that Harry was hard-pressed to match, an equally demonic strength, his fur provided a strong defence against spells, and his wounds healed real fast. Harry had strengthened skin as well, and, with his four arms, he was able to cast spells while fighting with his sword.

The skirmish went on for a few minutes, the two of them exchanging strikes and blows, and dodging the curses Voldemort was still throwing left and right. They were forced to a pause, though, when the tip of the darkened blade came to rest on Harry's shoulder. Harry's "original" left shoulder. The one where the silver-coated steel arm was attached.

Lestrangle had a feral smile, and he pushed forward, Harry trying to block him with his only unarmed hand – it was his metallic arm too, coincidentally. Despite hearing his hide sizzling against the hand's silver cover, the demon was too far gone in the fight to refuse to take an advantage. Harry sensed his opponent's intention, and he prepared himself.

At the precise moment Lestrangle chose to lunge forward, Harry extended his hand in a deadly form. The darkened sword penetrated his shoulder, dissociating his arm, and Lestrangle started to smile. His smile faltered, though, when he felt the wound in his chest. He briefly glanced down and howled in pain.

Using the beast's momentum, Harry had pushed his hand through the man's skin, using his hand as a claw. The silver-coated appendage pierced the hide and damaged several organs on his way to the man's heart.

Lestrangle tried to grab it, with the reasonable assumption that the arm would get out the way it came in. Harry had other ideas, though, and he took advantage of his permanent mental link to the prosthesis to make the silver hand grab the man's heart.

Lestrangle fell on his knees, gasping and desperately trying to yank the intruding limb out. Each yank damaged his heart even more, though, and he finally fell on his back.

Not missing a bit despite being quite short on breath, Harry positioned himself for a proper beheading. He raised his nodachi...

"Accio sword!" a commanding voice intoned.

'Shit.' he had forgotten those two. Malfoy and Dolohov hadn't been far.

Thankfully, nothing happened. 'That's not exactly a sword.' Harry thought absently, while surveying his opponents. 'He should expand his vocabulary. It's not that I don't want my nodachi to fly towards him at great speeds, but...'

"Petrificatus Totalus! Diffindo! Reducto!" Malfoy intoned.

Thankfully, the spells didn't work as Malfoy would have liked to. Harry merely turned his back to them, and the spell beams impacted with his mantle, the reflecting shield throwing them back to the two demons.

They dodged easily, but, by the time they looked at the scene again, Harry had Apparated out again. The boy briefly considered his options, before stowing his crossbow away. Even with his numerous weapons, there was no way he could Apparate in and do what he wanted without the three menaces getting to him. Unless...

Voldemort was there. Hearing Malfoy's voice seemed to have put some sense into that serpentine head of his, and he had finally yanked the offending bolt out. Now, a greenish liquid was oozing from his eye, and he was inspecting his surroundings with an attentive eye – only one, mind you.

Harry had a feeling that the Dark Lord was searching for him, and he quickly moved to his chosen position: right between Voldemort and Malfoy. He then became tangible again, his senses fully open to sense Malfoy and the other demon behind him, and a grim expression on his white face. He had a goal, and it crystallized almost immediately: Malfoy and Voldemort cursed him. Heavily. Using mostly dark and deadly spells.

But he wasn't there anymore. Once again, he had Apparated out. While the two evil spellcasters dealt with their own spells, Harry moved near Lestrage and, with a thought for the Longbottoms, he promptly beheaded the demon.

It was just in time, though, as he noticed that the body had almost pushed his arm out of the way already, healing itself despite being in contact with silver. 'That's not your everyday weretiger.' Harry thought. 'But... immortal? I don't think so.' After all, he possessed a fire able to do almost as much damage as Flamel's powder. Grabbing two pointy things from his pockets, he stuck them in Lestrage's chest and open mouth, activating them at the same time. Just as he finished doing so, though, he noticed two things. Two unwelcome things.

He felt an intrusion in his mind, and almost smiled. Almost. He didn't when he recognized the mental signature, and almost paused to see what would happen. At the same time, though, a green beam rushed towards him, and he did the first thing he could to avoid it: he Apparated out. He could take almost anything in, but not the Killing Curse. He didn't know about that, in fact, but he didn't want to test it either.

He wasn't going to stay where something dreadful was going to happen, so he he climbed a few dozen yards in the air, giving his

steel arm a longing look. Once high enough for his tastes, he was able to properly focus on what was going on in his mind.

Apparently, Voldemort's invading spirit was surprised. But not unimaginative. The man had started to attack the metal with a flaming tongue coming from his outstretched hands, and Harry knew that it would mean very bad business if Voldemort accessed the inside of his mind. His consciousness was somewhat protected, with all the defences he knew, but not his memories. Feeling that he had to engage in a more active defence mode, he directed the dragons toward the invader, and they attacked the Dark Lord's presence relentlessly.

Voldemort used his flamethrower to push them back, and he eventually succeeded in killing one. What surprised him, though was that the defeated dragon morphed into something twice as impressive. Two dragons. Two alive dragons.

Voldemort knew that he couldn't succeed in that way, and he stopped attacking and disappeared, retreating back to his own mind to reflect on this.

However, he didn't have time to reflect because, at the same time, the yard rocked under two powerful explosions. Harry surveyed the happenstance, mentally thanking Powell for the C4-filled pens. When it was done, there was almost nothing remaining of Lestrangle's head. And body. And Harry took care of the few remains by throwing a couple incendiary spells – he was still able to stick a limb in or out of the gaseous reality, and a wand-equipped hand was discreet enough to grill a few pepperonis without getting too much retribution.

Besides, the three others had been caught in the explosion, right? Harry had noticed that they had been pushed away, Malfoy even tripping on Voldemort's long snaky tail. Laughable.

However, as Lestrangle's last remains finished burning, Harry noticed something.

Hell, the whole county noticed. Even Voldemort and Malfoy had their hands to their ears, recoiling from the fourth demon's unearthly shriek.

Harry did so as well, even if he was a bit protected by the gaseous reality. At least, it allowed him to produce seemingly coherent thoughts while trying to move away from the wail. He absently wondered if there were muggles around right now, and about said muggles' hearing.

He wouldn't have confirmation, though, and it wouldn't be useful to worry about these poor people's ears. The demon's body started to pulsate, and his cry went even higher for a few seconds... and then Dolohov exploded. Literally.

Now, in most explosions, the matter is blocked by surrounding obstacles – the proof being the courtyard coated in Lestranger's blood. However, this was Death exploding, and the negative spiritual energies liberated by the demon expanded into a perfect sphere of magic centred on him, and several miles wide.

Deadly magic.

People and animals died on the spot. All vegetation and wood-related products rotted. Brick crumbled into dust, and houses collapsed. Metal rusted. Petrol turned into gas, making several vehicles blow up.

And, three miles underground, a subterranean field of petroleum exploded in the same way.

It would cause the largest earthquake unrelated to tectonic causes, reaching 6.4 on the Richter scale. And it would be the best cover story for the Ministry of Magic... because it really happened.

However, there was no consolation that the massive death toll had been of any compensation for getting rid of a Dark Lord: soon after Dolohov had started to scream, Malfoy had moved to Voldemort, and the two of them had been whisked away by the demon's return portkey.

None of them had witnessed a great snake hovering in the sky, mere microseconds before the explosion.

To be continued in next chapter: The Significance of Names...

The Apocalypse? Not yet,
Though it should be safe to bet
That those three won't come back soon.
But... what about Harry's boon?

Chapter 29 – The Significance of Names
posted January 27th, 2006

Voldemort paced. He was in a foul mood. A towering rage. He had even restarted cursing his followers.

“Crucio! Crucio! CRUCIO!”

When he lifted the last curse, the last follower was left as a quivering and whimpering mass. With a sneer, Voldemort lashed out with his massive tail, sending the recruit into a nearby wall. A disgusting crash was heard as the man’s bones snapped, silencing him definitely.

The Dark Lord turned back to Malfoy. “Tell me, again, how a single individual managed to kill three of you. And Death! Wasn’t he immortal?” He paused, remembering something from his “education” at the orphanage. He was surprised to have that kind of thoughts, because he had made sure to remove his memories of that time. “Is it because you should have been five?”

Lucius Malfoy didn’t look proud anymore. His countenance was even tinged with sadness. But he was still speaking in a commanding voice, his current demonic personality preventing anything less. “No, Lord Voldemort. We are four.”

“I have been said there was one of your kind named Plague.”

Malfoy smiled weakly. “People have given us all kind of names over the centuries. The fact is that we have been summoned several times, but the mixture used was a little different each time, and our powers were adjusted accordingly. Plague was summoned in my stead 650 years ago, my lord. As I recall, he was quite successful in his endeavours.”

He paused, earning an impatient question from Voldemort. “And why did your... friends... die?”

“We were made to follow each other, my lord, and our demonic powers have been given accordingly. The... enemy... must have

known that, because he got Famine first. Famine had always been the weakest one. I don't know how he could have fought War, but he was wielding things we didn't know about. The purifying fire he brandished was something I have never seen." A pause. "I myself don't bring death to my enemies. It's only through my host that I can do so. Death was linked to Famine and War, and, when those two were vanquished, Death was, too. That is why I wondered if the... man... knew that, or if he was plainly lucky."

Voldemort glared at him, his left eye still dripping green blood. "Who is it?"

"I do not know, my lord. But it doesn't matter."

A pause, again. "Why?" asked Voldemort with annoyance.

"He surely died with Death. The wail of death was announcing something I had rarely seen, and, by now, there shouldn't be anyone alive miles around that particular place."

"Hmmm... Travers!" Voldemort hissed.

"My Lord?" the addressed Death Eater enquired, kneeling so low that his forehead was touching the marble floor.

"Take a team with you. Investigate the place. Search for the body of a man with a white face and four arms, one of which is metallic. Bring it to me."

"What if he's alive, My Lord?"

Voldemort's right eye lit with an unholy glimmer. "Try to subdue him, then. I would be glad to interrogate him myself." He paused, before remembering the unknown man's deadliness. "But, if you can't, follow my first order: bring his body."

"You wish is my command, Master." Travers said, before slinking away.

Voldemort then remembered something else and called the Carrow siblings forward. "Alecto, Amycus, I want you to investigate a particular town for me. The man had a shield with the crest of Venice. Go there, find the magical section of the town, and interrogate." He paused, before adding "You have a licence to kill... and to do anything else."

The two siblings looked at each other and leered, before leaving the room.

Voldemort spent another half an hour cursing his followers, before being interrupted.

"My Lord?" a tired-looking Snape asked from the doorway. "The potion is ready."

Voldemort, having been interrupted in an invigorating session of torture, looked ready to kill the Potion Master, who recoiled under the glare. The Dark Lord's expression changed slowly, though, and he addressed him.

"Bring it, then."

Snape bowed and fetched the cauldron. Once it was settled, Voldemort looked around. He wanted strong allies, and his one-eyed gaze immediately caught Derrick's large shape in the crowd. Right beside the blond man, he noticed another follower who he could call powerful and faithful, and he called them to the fore.

"Ursinus, Bellatrix, come forward."

Coincidentally, the other members of his Inner Circle being on information gathering mission, those two and Snape were the only ones available. Voldemort snorted, looking at the assembled followers. 'Weaklings.' he thought, before looking at Malfoy.

The man looked back at him and understood the unvoiced question. "I can't, my Lord. Taking the potion would not add to my powers, it would only change them."

“The potion is cooling, my Lord.” Snape said, reminding Voldemort that he had to choose fast.

With a frown, he looked back at his Potion Master, before remembering something. “What did you say about loyalty, earlier?”

“Some of the potion’s ingredients and part of its recipe suggest an added touch of loyalty, my Lord. Given Malfoy’s power and his faithfulness, I can only suppose that it’s towards you.”

Voldemort thought about it for a second, before calling two of his Death Eaters. “You there! Go fetch Weasley!”

“If he’s to be the third, we will still need a fourth one, my Lord.” Snape said, still turning the ladle.

Turning to face him, Voldemort had a sudden idea. “He is already found.” he said smugly.

Startled at the tone, Snape looked up and met the Dark Lord’s unfaltering gaze. “Me? But...”

Bellatrix, who had been uncharacteristically silent since she had learnt of her husband’s death, chose that moment to speak up. “Come on, Sevvie. The more, the merrier.”

Snape was ready to snap at her, but Voldemort’s interrogating gaze held him in place.

“Unless you aren’t sure of your potion, Severus, you will drink it.” the Dark Lord said, and that was final.

Bill Weasley was brought in front of them and, after being magically bound and awakened, he was given the first dose. Derrick and Bellatrix followed suit, with Snape taking whatever remained in the cauldron, his mind whirling about the numerous things which could go awry. After all, even if the first potion had worked, it hadn’t been painless. Was that because he had used Unicorn blood instead of

blood of that unknown creature? Snape had never been good in Care of Magical Creatures, but he had parsed through all the books at his hands, even the ones speaking of utterly dark creatures, but he found no mention of a beast named Kirin. It was only through the recipe author's words that he knew the properties of the beast's blood – and that's how he had been able to use a unicorn's in its place.

Thinking of the ingredient reminded him of something else: he had needed several ounces of Unicorn blood for the first potion, and, given the price and availability of the ingredient on the market, he had magically duplicated the vial before doing so.

He froze, a stray thought impacting him. He had used the duplicated blood for the second potion. Was it going to cause unwanted effects? As the mixture radiated from his stomach to his extremities, causing some changes here and there, his feeling of wrongness intensified.

Snape couldn't voice his anxiousness, though, as pain seized him and his three comrades, and they fell on the floor, writhing until Voldemort Stunned them.

"Well... that was interesting," he said. A gasp from his followers brought his gaze to the first drinker, and he instantly knew that something was wrong. White light was coming off of Bill, and, after intensifying for a second, it disappeared completely.

The blinding light wasn't the only thing to have disappeared, though: the redhead had left as well. The only things remaining were the ropes he had been tied with and his clothes. And a tiny thing that no one remarked.

A white feather.
Somewhere else...

Harry looked around. He was sitting on something that resembled a bench, overlooking something that resembled a house, with something resembling trees around it.

The something was white and translucent. Almost as if he was in the clouds.

A chuckle brought his attention to the man next to him.

“Clouds, right.” the man said. “I gather that’s how you think of the afterlife.”

Harry was stunned, but that remark diverted his thoughts. “Am I dead?”

“Generally, when people ask themselves that kind of question, they are not.” the man replied. “However, giving the place we are in, you would be allowed to wonder.” A pause. “You are at my home in the spiritual plane of existence.”

“Who are you?” Harry asked, saving the complicated question for later.

The man looked back at him. “You could say I’m your protector, since I appeared just in time to nick you out of a certainly deadly situation.”

“Well... thank you, then.”

“No need to thank me. I was appointed to help you.”

“Appointed? By who?”

The man’s eyes twinkled with amusement. “By myself, who else?”

Harry looked at him as he would Dumbledore when the Headmaster started to prattle about his beloved lemon candy.

“When you helped me defeat my enemies, I vowed to help you, Harry. It was high time I did so, although I can only congratulate you on your learning of such impressive fighting styles.”

“Enemies? Vowed? Styles?” Harry was stumped.

“Ah, yes. You don’t remember the fight, do you? In the... how do you call it... the airplane? Of course not, you were unconscious.” He

smiled genially. "Although, I'm quite sure you'll recognize me when I'll take my normal form again."

"What do you mean?"

"You would have freaked if I had appeared like Voldemort when you were waking up. I'm not Voldemort." he warned, and his body changed.

It grew taller and taller, and slimmer as well. His skin darkened until it was a deep green, and numerous vividly orange feathers appeared on his back. "I'm Quetzalcoatl, Harry. Your Nahual, sort of. Pleased to meet you face-to-face, at last."

Harry gasped, several things coming to his mind at once, not least of which... "My Nahual?" A pause. "Sort of?"

"Well, yes. In the earliest days of my culture, the humans were protected by animals chosen by the gods at their birth. As the population grew, we left the task to humans we selected for their closeness to their animal. These we gifted with the ability to change shape into that animal." He smiled. "Since you already are a powerful shape-changer, it was only natural for you to have a heavenly Nahual." He bowed. "Like me."

The feathered snake "stood up" and extended a hand to Harry. "Ready to go back?"

"But... can I have... how will I..." Harry stuttered.

Quetzalcoatl smiled. "I will be there when you will need me, young Harry Potter."

Harry accepted the hand and disappeared soon afterwards.

Quetzalcoatl smiled absently, before schooling his expression and turning around. "Satisfied?"

Several shapes shimmered into view, and one of them addressed him. "You are crazy, Quetzal, you know that? Bringing a mortal here... a living one, no less."

The Aztec god smiled at the woman who had just spoken. She was holding a shield and two arrows, but he knew that she had more than one aspect. "I know, Neith." he said, and his smile receded. "However, he is instrumental to our continued existence. Don't forget that."

"I know, I know." she answered. "Imhotep spoke with Merlin about this, but both know the fight is inevitable. Wadjet has really outdone herself, now, and that Dark Lord she has elevated must be stopped before he kills all life on Earth. To see those four demons again..." she shuddered.

"Indeed." Another goddess, who happened to have a gorgeous body and several arms, butted in, earning herself a few glares. "What? I may be a goddess of destruction, I still want to live. We all know that, without life on earth, all the souls would stay in the Heavens. The combined weight of those, especially if killed brutally, would imbalance the structure of the universe itself."

"We know that, Kali." Quetzalcoatl interrupted.

The addressed goddess raised her head staunchly. "He fought well and protected my people from those lowly demons. I like him."

"Who wouldn't?" Neith sighed. "I want him to live old enough to marry. I wish I was allowed to give him the location of Wadjet's hideout."

The snake-like god frowned at the thought. "Don't forget the rules: we just don't go help humans haphazardly-

"-unless there is a reason for it, and only if at least two other deities concur. I know." She smiled. "That's why you asked us, as I recall. But there's always the possibility of sending envoys. After all, we know of one of them, even if he doesn't know about it yet."

That raised a few comments from the small assembly, and they all fell silent soon afterwards, before leaving to their respective tasks.

When Harry reappeared in the Indian town, nobody remarked him. It wasn't because the place was empty, no: the town was crawling with people running around, trying to find survivors from the earthquake. It was because there were so many people that he went unnoticed. Of course, it helped that he had morphed his arms back into a normal set of two. He had also lowered his mask and morphed his face to look like one of the locals.

Harry didn't have to search for his tachi to find it: he merely willed it in his hand, and, after inspecting it for damages and noticing that no traces remained of the demon's influence, he magically sent it back to its box. Wanting to cast a couple of spells to recover his paraphernalia, Harry applied a Notice-me-not charm on himself, and he then Summoned the debris of his shield and his arm. Both were in an almost unrecognisable state due to the powerful explosions that had occurred nearby.

Wanting his stuff repaired, he decided to leave to Venice, but an ominous feeling prevented him to leave right now. His senses explored his surroundings, and he felt an anti-Apparation ward over the square and several unsavoury characters nearby.

Not wanting to bring the fight to the open area, he entered the first house he found, and, after Levitating himself to an interesting height and Apparating out, he waited for them to arrive.

And arrive they did. Seven of them. All Death Eaters.

"Where is he?" asked the one that could only be their chief. "I can't believe he left! Are you sure of your ward?" he asked the man to his right. Said man acquiesced, and Travers looked around. "A portkey, maybe?"

His sidekick cast the appropriate spell, before shaking his head. "No sign of portkey transportation, sir."

“I can’t believe it! Our Lord will have your hide, if we can’t find him!”

“It wasn’t him, sir. The local we noticed had his two arms and no white face. It just happened that he found the metallic arm. He’s perhaps a muggle?”

“A muggle couldn’t have disappeared like that!” Travers yelled.

Harry had had enough, and decided to act now. After all, even stuck in the not-so-gaseous-anymore reality, he could make his hand become tangible, and he could stun the seven of them without much danger. Especially as they couldn’t Apparate.

However, something happened, causing his action to be superfluous.

The door opened wide, and several red beams impacted with the dark wizards. It was only thanks to a high-backed armchair that Travers and his sidekick were able to evade the incoming threat. They both grabbed their portkeys and disappeared just as a human-shaped shimmer was cornering them.

“Portkeys. Damn.” a voice cursed. “Alright, team. Time to wrap up.”

The shimmer seemed to move around a little, and the Disillusionment charm lifted. Three others did, too, and Harry recognized the uniform of Aurors. While they were stripping the Death Eaters of everything magical they had on them – wands, portkeys, and other trinkets –, the one leading them spoke in a little device. “Situation cleared. Five enemies down. Two fled with portkeys.”

Harry thought he heard the gruff voice of Alastor Moody answering from the device, and he smiled internally.

The Aurors used a special set of portkeys to whisk the Death Eaters away, surely towards some restraining cell in the Ministry, before following through Apparation – with Travers gone, the anti-Apparation field was easier to dispel.

Harry knew that nothing more had to be done, and he left towards Venice.

As he was flying at high speed over the Middle East countries and seas, Harry fished the two halves of his shield out of his enlarged pockets and eyed them suspiciously, wondering if the Knighthood would try to kick him out for using their "honoured" material.

However, as he was nearing the town, Harry noticed that something was wrong. So very wrong.

Two Death Eaters were standing in the middle of a ring of bodies, and they were cursing the Venetian Knights using the one curse that was both Unforgivable and deadly: the Killing Curse. The under-trained population was running around in fear, and the Knights weren't faring much better. All they knew was the Stunning spell, and it was blocked too easily by the two aggressors.

Harry saw red instantly, and felt something happen to his eyes. Still in the gaseous reality, he rushed forward.

He still had the two parts of shield in his hands, and, as Alecto and Amycus Carrow cast the Killing Curse one more time, he Apparated in and threw the pieces in the path of the curses. The sick green beams impacted with the flying slabs of metal, and, not finding a living being underneath, they dissipated harmlessly. Using his two rings, Harry immediately Summoned the two halves again, and they appeared in his hands just as he made a stop in front of the two killers.

It was one of those moments when someone in his place would have said something like "Time to pay for your crimes." or such superfluous wise words. Harry's eyes said enough, though: he was so angered that they had burst into flame again. Harry was equally focused on his task, and he brought the two ends of the shield onto the Carrows.

Amycus' stomach was on the path of a particularly wicked-looking and pointy sheet of metal, while Alecto, being shorter than her brother, saw the other half arriving near her head. Harry was so quick in his move that they hadn't had time to recover from seeing him appear

from thin air and block two Killing Curses. They couldn't block his attack.

Alecto's mask was knocked off her face and she fell unconscious, dropping her wand in the process. Amycus was still conscious from his belly wound, but he instinctively knew that it was a wicked one, and he decided to leave the place and the angry man. Before Harry could do anything else, he had grabbed his sister and activated his emergency return portkey.

Harry looked at the place where the two of them left, almost wishing they hadn't so that they would get what they deserved. After several minutes, his anger abated enough so that his eyes were back to their liquid state. He finally noticed that some of the fallen weren't dead, and he rushed to help them. The locals were uneasy around him, but Leonardo greeted him cordially, and Harry remembered about his mask. Once he was clothed "appropriately", he could heal the wounded ones more efficiently.

It was only a few hours afterwards that Harry and Leonardo, both weary from the attack and its consequences, were able to meet in the Doge's study, alone.

Harry was feeling guilty of having displayed the shield to Voldemort, thinking that it had brought the snake-like man's ire onto the magical community. "I'm sorry. I came here because... well, it doesn't matter. I should leave, now."

"Odysseus... Harry." Leonardo called. "Please stay."

Harry had wanted to leave the room, but he returned to his seat. The many casualties of that day came back to his mind, and he shuddered.

Leonardo considered the distraught man in front of him for several seconds, before speaking up. "Thank you."

That particular line made Harry look up suddenly. "You aren't angry about them getting in because of me?"

“Why would I?”

“I used the shield... the Cavalieri’s shield... Voldemort kind of recognized it. In fact, I didn’t know he sent those two. I was just here because... because the shield broke when I was fighting him and his minions, in India. And the arm melted, too.”

“Melted?”

“Yes. There were those... demons, and... a friend of mine... gave me something to get rid of them. I reckon it was some advanced incendiary powder, and it destroyed the first demon’s physical body just fine.” Harry was launched, and he didn’t notice Leonardo’s slightly surprised expression. “Anyways... the second one I offed, I didn’t have that powder anymore, so I just used a muggle item that I knew would destroy his body as well. I haven’t had time to grab the arm before it went off.” He sighed, and started to pull his Cavalieri ring off his finger. “But it doesn’t matter. You won’t want me here anymore.”

“Harry...”

“Voldemort noticed the shield because of me, I’m sure.”

“Harry!”

“And he... what?”

“Keep the ring. You are not to blame. In fact, I thank you for having been there when you did. For centuries, we have believed in the barriers keeping the non-magical people away, and we are heavily under-trained to defend against a magical opponent, as you noticed.”

“But... you said Voldemort came here before?”

“Yes, but he merely left us, while those two were really aggressive.”

“No, I mean... didn’t the Cavalieri train harder after he came?”

Leonardo sighed. "The council thought that it was a one-time event."

"I guess their views changed, now."

"Most of them are dead, now." Leonardo deadpanned. "Even if they were slow in reaction, they still gave their lives for the city."

Harry had blanched. "My god... I'm sorry, I didn't-"

"Don't apologize. None of this is your fault. Besides, I have a request."

"Agreed."

The Doge paused. "You know, it's dangerous to accept to fulfil a request without hearing it before."

"You may not see it like that, but I feel indebted unto you, so... I decided to accept any request you may have."

"You said that you fought, in India. Is it possible to help the Cavalieri train? You choose when."

"As I said, I agree." Harry smiled. "In fact, I'm happy you asked that, because I have... let's just say that I have a free spot everyday from early morning until mid-afternoon." And it was quite true: since Harry repeated each day twice, spending the evening in Japan, the mornings of the "second days" were free.

"Everyday? What about your other activities?"

Harry smiled. "I just make time for everything."

Leonardo didn't catch the hidden meaning – he wasn't a mind reader, after all; and even if he was, Harry's defences were quite strong, by now. "Very well." he said. "Is it alright if you come here from nine to twelve every week day?"

“Perfect.” Harry said, nodding, before frowning suddenly. “There’s just a catch. There are times when I won’t be able to come, and I won’t be able to warn you about them.”

“Well... alright, I guess. Everybody has their own problems.” A pause. “Will you stay for the funeral? It’s tomorrow, in the morning. You can sleep here, if you so wish. There are enough rooms.”

Harry hadn’t realized until now, but he had lived the last few hours on an adrenaline peak, and he was knackered. He nodded weakly, and followed the man to the spare bedroom. He fell on the bed with his clothes on, and was asleep before long.

The next day saw Harry help the funeral held for the eight dead knights, and he wasn’t able to relax before all of their families had thanked him for his timely arrival. After the ceremony, he met Leonardo again, and the man started by giving him his metal arm – he had made it so it was promptly repaired – and a new shield. He explained that most Venetian knights held the usual shield as a decorative piece, but, given that Harry was actually fighting with it, the Doge had fetched a sturdier one from his personal collection.

After thanking him profusely, Harry took leave of Venice with Leonardo’s blessings following him. And, midway from England, he turned his Time Turner again, returning to the previous evening.

After seeing his past self disappear towards India, he reappeared next to Flamel, who looked at him appraisingly.

“Good.” the old alchemist said. “I gather that everything went well. Or is going to go well.”

That reminded Harry of something. A question that his past self was going to ask himself soon. “Why?” he asked, his teeth clenched.

“Why what, apprentice?”

Harry drew a large intake of breath before answering. “WHY DID YOU HAVE TO WAIT SO LONG BEFORE SENDING ME THERE?”

he yelled, so loud that people on the other side of the castle might have heard, were it not for the strong Privacy charms already in place. With a sigh, he sat down heavily. "There were so many bodies that I couldn't even start counting them."

That made Flamel reflect for a while before he started to answer. "I'm sorry, Harry, but Merlin's indications were clear. If you had appeared earlier, my only guess is that you'd have faced several of these demons at the same time, a very difficult task, even with your skills."

"But the deaths—"

"They couldn't be avoided. If what Merlin predicted is true, one of these demons is a representation of Death itself, and they are known to be near immortal. When they die, they kill everything in a wide radius as well."

"I could have... I don't know... taken them in a desert, or something."

"Harry... you can think about it all you want, but it won't change what happened." Flamel said, patting the boy's back. Both of them knew that the man's words were precise: Harry could change the past, but he couldn't change the causality order around himself.

"Alright." Harry said weakly, before straightening up. "Can we face the music, now?"

"You want to return there right now?"

Harry smirked. "No time like the present. After all, I already rested a whole night between now and... the event."

"Alright. We shall leave, then."

The two of them returned to the Headmaster's office, where Flamel left his apprentice before heading to his own quarters. Harry thought he heard the old man mutter as he was leaving, but he didn't intrude in his thoughts. After collecting himself, he climbed the stairs and opened the office door.

The cacophony hit him like a shockwave, and he could only gape at the chaos the small office was in. Everybody was yelling at the same time, and even the loud bangs from Dumbledore's wand weren't enough to calm them. Harry looked around, but Alastor Moody wasn't there anymore. Looking at his watch, Harry reflected that the old Auror had surely left for India, and he calmly retook his seat.

After a few minutes, Dumbledore decided to grab the bull by the horns, and he Silenced the whole room. It still took the most vocal members several seconds to become aware that their own voice wasn't heard: Molly Weasley and Frank Longbottoms blushed when they noticed that they were the last to yell in silence, and they sat down like the others.

"Thank you." Dumbledore said, and everyone felt the man's sarcasm behind the twinkling blue eyes. A few of them noticed Harry as well, and – as they hadn't seen him entering during the yelling session – they thought he had appeared out of thin air. Nymphadora Tonks, being one of them, tried to jump to her feet and draw her wand at the same time, but both actions failed. Her foot took hold of the chair's leg and she fell flat on the floor, her wand clattering away from her.

Not missing a beat, Remus stood and grabbed it, before helping her to her seat.

"Thank you." Dumbledore repeated, while a beet red Tonks, still Silenced, mouthed the same words to the blushing ex-werewolf.

Seeing Sirius nearby, Harry started a mental chat with his godfather, and discovered that the little group had been debating on whether going to India to investigate the problem or not. Some had said that the Order of the Phoenix would help any and all victims, while others said that it was dedicated to Voldemort's demise, and that spreading their resources internationally like that was perhaps Voldemort's initial goal.

Having those mental discussions was very useful, but, at that precise moment, Harry forgot something. Despite having some of his memories perfectly hidden, Sirius was not trained to be an Occlumens. And Dumbledore was a powerful Legilimens.

“Henry? Sirius? Anything you want to share?”

Harry, startled, looked at the old Headmaster and noticed that the amused twinkle was gone, replaced by a curious expression. Curious, and stern.

Harry sent a quick warning glance to Sirius – both of them knew that, in a verbal joust with the Headmaster, Harry was the best liar of the two – before answering, sticking to the truth as much as possible. After all, they had been caught red-handed. “You know that I checked with Sirius and Remus about the lesson plans, Albus. After a short time, we became friends, and we trusted each other enough for me to tell them a little secret.” He paused, and looked around, his frown warning them that it should stay in the current circle. “I’m a Leg-”

Something happened right then, and whatever he wanted to say was swallowed by a shocked gasp.

In the middle of the enlarged office, a small candlelight appeared, and, in a matter of seconds, it grew into an eight-foot tall cone brightly illuminating the room. The Order members had recoiled in shock, some crouching behind furniture while others tried to send Stunning curses towards the cone. The spells disappeared when impacting it, without any indication whether they had been successful. Even Dumbledore had tried with the same result.

However, despite the suddenness of the cone’s appearance and the others’ reactions, Harry hadn’t moved. He felt a great calm coming from the white shape, and, noticing that several members were ready to try more damaging curses, he tried to prevent it.

“Stop, please. I don’t think it’s dangerous... whatever it is.”

“Darn, I’m shure it’s ewul!” Mundungus slurred. “T’appears in thin air by Dumblydoor’s... must be! Reducto!”

Harry was faster, though. Halfway in the man’s discourse, he had drawn his Nundu wand out and had cast a shield around the shape. The explosion curse struck it and dissipated – with unstable people like Mundungus around, Harry wouldn’t have cast a reflecting shield.

“How can you be so sure of yourself?” Harry angrily asked the man.

“That’s precisely the question I wanted to ask you.” Dumbledore said, and Harry whirled around.

“Don’t you feel the calmness coming from it?”

That provoked several seconds of silence, while the members around him tried to feel the thing. Several were startled to feel it, now, and they stowed their wand away – Harry included. Dumbledore kept his own out, though, and looked at Harry enquiringly. “Even dark creatures can play with others’ minds, Henry.”

Harry smirked. “Not this one.” he said, and, in the privacy of his own mind, he added ‘Not to me.’

Dumbledore continued to gaze at him with a shrewd expression, only giving the light cone the briefest of glances now and then – the thing hadn’t disappeared yet, and it hadn’t moved, or changed in any way. The Headmaster’s eyes widened suddenly, and he addressed Harry again. “Henry, do you have the Time Turner on yourself?”

‘Uh oh. What is he after, now?’ Harry thought. “Certainly.” he said, and extracted the thing from his robes. Too fast for him to react, Dumbledore cast a spell on the item, and several numbers appeared around it, and floated for a few seconds even though Harry stowed the magic item away.

The Headmaster’s eyes narrowed, and he looked at Harry accusingly. “What have you done?” he asked, pointing his wand at Harry.

“What do you mean?” asked Harry. “What do these numbers mean?”

“These numbers give me the number of times you went back in time, the total duration since I last reinitialised it, and the last trip’s information. You actually come from tomorrow, so I ask you again: what have you done?”

There was only one word being heard in Harry’s mind at that very moment. ‘Shit.’

Everyone’s gaze was on Harry now, which caused them a great fright when a soothing voice came from where the cone was.

“You should put your wand away, mortal.”

Dumbledore’s eyes went to the cone of light, and, truth be told, the light began to recede. “Why? And what are you?”

“Because I say so.” the voice said, its musicality and gentleness preventing everyone from guessing the gender of its owner. However, there was no weakness in the force that yanked Dumbledore’s wand from his grasp, and it was absorbed in a darker crack in the cone, crack which vanished quickly.

A stunned pause ensued, which lasted several seconds. In the meantime, the light from the initial cone had completely faded away, leaving place to another cone... of white feathers. These feathers trembled once, twice... and then moved: they separated. And everyone gasped when they revealed themselves to belong to two very large wings.

Two wings which were attached to the back of a particular red-haired individual, clad in a gold-trimmed white toga. The long hair was flowing behind the man’s shoulders, and the earring was gone.

“Bill!” Molly shrieked, recognition striking her before anyone else. She lunged at him, but she was stopped at arm’s length.

"Bill" looked at her, his head tilted to the side. "Yes. You are Molly Weasley. However, I'm not your son, even if I was compelled to take his body."

"Take his body?" "Compelled?" Discord reigned again, and the Headmaster went for his wand, before remembering where it was. Harry noticed, though, and he decided to cast the spell.

Once again, the room was Silenced, and the winged creature posing as Bill could speak again. "As I said, I was sent there. An individual named Severus Snape made a potion under some Tom Riddle's orders." he said in his melodious voice, and no one thought of interrupting him. "This potion was made to summon beings from other planes, and they had tried it on the followers of that Tom Riddle person once already. Four demons were Summoned to inhabit their bodies, but Harry Potter succeeded in sending three of them back to where they belong."

Only Harry and Dumbledore seemed to twitch at the utterance of Harry's name. But they continued to listen to Bill as he spoke. "The Severus Snape fellow brew a new batch, and he came to the realization that his potion had a Loyalty component. Thinking that it would ensure the blind loyalty of the drinkers to the brewer or said brewer's master, they gave a part to the man named Bill Weasley."

A short pause.

"They thought wrong. The Loyalty component only enforces the side the person is already leaning towards. As Bill Weasley is a Light person, no demon was called to inhabit his body. I was."

Another pause. Much longer, since it took several minutes for everyone to wake up from the angelic voice. In fact, for a strange reason, Harry was unaffected by the voice's quality, but he didn't want to be on the front of the scene right now, so he kept quiet.

Dumbledore was the first to react. "And... who and what are you?"

“I cannot tell you my name, because it enraptures the human mind. But you can call me Raphael. I am the opposite of a demon, and their natural opponent.”

Realization struck Dumbledore like a ton of bricks – muggle bricks, mind you, and not Cushioned in any way. “You’re... but...” for the first time in a long while, the old man was lost for words.

Bill – or, rather, Raphael – smiled gently, and he nodded.

The Headmaster sat down heavily, and absently made a gesture towards his liquor cabinet, before remembering his company.

Several Order members were trying to whisper to each other, but Harry’s spell wasn’t lifted yet, and they were reduced to use hand moves. After a while, Remus waved at Harry and motioned for his mouth, and Harry lifted the Silence spell.

“What is he, Albus?” McGonagall asked, and several members were looking at the Headmaster, the same question etched on their features.

“He’s an angel.” he said, before frowning. “Or more.”

“More?” she asked. “What could be more than... oh my god.”

Dumbledore smiled. “Indeed.” he said, before turning to the winged individual in the room. “May I introduce you?”

“Since you seem to have reached the appropriate conclusion, please proceed.”

Dumbledore nodded in a polite fashion, and glanced at the assembled people, who were looking at him. “Our esteemed guest is no less than the archangel Raphael.” He then turned to said archangel. “May I inquire about the reasons for your presence in our humble assembly? Surely, another angel might have been enough for the job. I speak no offence, of course.”

“And I take no offence either. Here is your focus, by the way.” Raphael said, and Dumbledore’s wand appeared on his desk. “A total of six demons have been summoned recently, and no lowly ones either. I don’t know their names, though, so I don’t know their powers either. However, I know that one of them was going to be an archdemon. Because of this, the celestial powers ruled that the least they could do was send someone of my status or higher. The other divines are all taken by their numerous tasks, so I volunteered and was sent here.”

Dumbledore bowed. “I thank you for joining me in that crusade against evil, and-”

“Don’t say that word, please.” the angel said, wincing. “It’s bad enough that humans go warring each other on petty religious differences while they believe in the same god.” A short pause. “And I’m not joining you.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Dumbledore amended. “I said “me” as leader of the Order of the Phoenix.”

“I’m not joining the Order of the Phoenix, either.” Raphael said, before turning his eyes towards Harry.

Harry blanched. “Don’t...” he whispered, but the celestial being smiled.

“I’m here to join Harry Potter.”

A pause ensued, and people gathered their thoughts. Dumbledore looked at the by-play and frowned, before sighing. “Very well. Henry, you will lead our guest to Harry Potter.” ‘And we will follow you.’ he added mentally. In his mind, Raphael had looked at Henry Evans as the only link towards Harry Potter. Henry knew Jerry, who knew Harry, so that was a believable path, right?

Something bothered the old man, though, and he focused on it, missing Raphael shaking his head in denegation and the Defence teacher doing the same at the angel.

‘Why would an archangel need humans to get to other humans? After all, he appeared in my office, and if it is in his power, he can appear anywhere on Earth. Why in the Hell... well, that’s an incorrect statement, now... why in the Heavens would he need Henry?’

He looked up to see his Defence teacher in quite a quandary. Harry appeared to blink in and out of reality, as if trying to escape, but Raphael had a hand extended towards him. “Now, now... Don’t you think it’s time you revealed yourself?” the archangel asked gently. “You will need allies in this fight.”

Harry stopped trying to Apparate and looked at him. “But they... he only sees me... Dumbledore... as a weapon!” Harry exclaimed, looking at Dumbledore with a swirl of emotions behind his eyes. Anger, sadness, betrayal, loneliness...

It finally clicked in Dumbledore’s mind, and the old man sat back in shock. Raphael hadn’t needed a link to Harry Potter – especially as, as a being of divine power, he hadn’t needed such a link. He went to him, directly. “Harry?” he asked.

The man he knew as Henry Evans looked at Raphael, and the two of them seemed to hold a mental conversation for a few seconds. Unbeknownst by everyone, Harry then did the same with Sirius and Remus.

“Alright.” Harry said in the eerie silence that had filled the room, and he felt a heavy weight shift off his shoulders. For years, now, he had wondered what would happen when Dumbledore would realize who he really was. He had thought of angry confrontations, he had thought of subduing or being subdued by the old man. Nowhere in his wildest dreams had he been forced to admit his identity because of a celestial being, nor would he admit being soothed by said being.

“I’m Harry Potter.” he said, and stood up. In front of them, he morphed back into his natural shape, foregoing his eyes and his left arm. He didn’t want to advertise all his powers so soon, and fiery eyes and growing arms belonged to the set of things he wanted to stay hidden. He seemed unbalanced, now, with an adult arm on his

left side. However, the emerald green eyes – like his own had been, such a long time ago – stared at Dumbledore, unwavering.

The members of the Order of the Phoenix gasped. Sure, given his history, the teenager in front of them was no pushover, but they had difficulties realizing that a mere 13-years old boy had been teaching... Defence, no less.

“But... where is your scar?” somebody asked.

“My adoptive parents – yes, the Dursleys adopted me – took care of that.” he shrugged.

“But... how?”

“Plastic surgery.” he replied simply, and, looking at the stumped faces around him, he huffed. “Seriously, people, have you even heard about the muggle world?” He kept silent the fact that the scar had reappeared when Voldemort gained power again – since the link between him and the Dark Lord was now dead, there was no need to bring that piece of information to the fore.

Something else fell into place in the Headmaster’s mind. “Harry? Raphael said that you sent demons “where they belong”... to Hell? How?”

Harry smirked, earning shocked gazes. Not only wasn’t he a pushover, but the slowest Order members realized that he was a tough fighter as well – some of them actually owed him their life. “I really don’t know where they went.” he answered. “But, wherever that is, Lestrage and Rookwood went without a body. There was a third one as well, but I don’t know his name. Malfoy is still the same vampiric monster, though. I think he feeds on children’s souls or something like that: each time I struck him, I saw a ghostly child shape emerging from his body. Oh, and there’s something you might like.” He smirked again. “Voldemort is half-blind, now.”

“What?” came from all sides.

He shrugged. "Well, I was trying to hit him, but he has a darn thick hide. I remembered some beasts from Africa, and went for the eye. A most satisfying hit." he said, smiling.

Even Dumbledore was speechless, although, strangely, the old man was feeling giddy. And that wasn't because of the angel there. For the first time since the Dark Lord's reappearance, there was serious hope for the Light side to succeed. However, when he looked at Harry, Dumbledore knew that the teenaged boy had lost his childhood early, and that he was partly to blame.

"You were never in Brazil, then?" he asked out of the blue.

"Oh, I was, alright. Seemed that Voldemort had a way to act on me through whatever link he forged between us by trying to kill me in my young age. As I didn't want to be too near to my family when earthquakes or killing rages occurred, I have been travelling." He smiled at their shocked faces. "But it's gone, now. He can't do that anymore."

"You seem to be pretty powerful for your age... Was it Jerry who taught you all this?" Dumbledore asked.

"Not really." Harry started, reminiscing his younger years. "As I said when I was Henry, I had several masters of deadly trades teaching me, although I started learning by myself in the beginning. I think that having a link to Voldemort in my head helped me, especially when he was weak. I learnt to block his attacks, though, and, later, I collapsed the link between us."

"But you cut a link to valuable information!" Dumbledore exclaimed.

"It was way too dangerous!" Harry retorted. "Or did you want your precious weapon possessed by Voldemort 24/7? He allied himself with a bloody goddess, for Merlin's sake!" He shouted back, before realizing what he had said. "Sorry." he whispered.

Not knowing that Harry was apologizing to Merlin and not him, Dumbledore nodded. The boy had given him much to think about, though.

Harry wasn't finished, though. "Back to your original question: I now know about accidental magic, and, had you given my adoptive parents a way to reach you for information, or had you checked on me earlier than you did, you would have found out that I did almost no accidental magic for as long as I remember."

"But..."

"I did controlled magic. The very few times I did magic accidentally, I was able to reproduce the event afterwards. At five years old, I was able to Levitate a dozen toys in a controlled manner. At seven, I could Summon things. The following years, I learnt to heal myself, I found out about my Metamorphmagus abilities, and I discovered how to Apparate. Now, I know that it's not the standard way to do things. However, despite putting me in danger from muggles a couple of times, it helped me tremendously."

Mundungus butted in. "What can ye do?"

Harry looked at him for a few seconds. He then frowned and stared at him for an even longer time. The somewhat dirty man didn't seem to be offended by the stare, though, and he was looking... oblivious.

"Albus?" Harry called, surprising the Headmaster and the Order members equally. "I suggest that you adjourn the meeting. I need to talk to you in private."

"Before I do that, Harry, we need to discuss your... unusual situation. You'll understand that I can't let you continue this charade."

Harry tensed, and he slowly turned around so that he was facing the old Headmaster. "What did you just say?" he asked. Had he been sensing his surroundings, he would have noticed Raphael doing something behind his back, but he didn't, and the Headmaster didn't either.

“I made a mistake in hiring someone as young as you, Harry. You ought to retrieve a proper and balanced education, too. You are quite the fighter, but I want you to enjoy the rest of your childhood while you are young, especially as, as you said, you lost a part of it while travelling. Since you came here by your own choices, it’s time for you to be directed towards a proper attitude.”

“What gives you that right?” Harry exclaimed indignantly. “You relinquished any right on my person when you gave me to the Dursleys. A childhood? A proper attitude? Do you really think that I’ll join those good-for-nothing students milling around the school? I have more important things to deal with!” By now, he was building a towering rage, and his eyes were narrowed at Dumbledore, his fists clenched into strong fists.

“I am the Headmaster of this school, Harry.” said Headmaster replied, taking advantage of a breathing pause in the teen’s rant. “I decide what goes on in my school. Besides, you need to learn to control yourself. I see that you are angry, now, and I don’t want this kind of reaction, now or later. I know that you have important issues to deal with, but they will be addressed in due time, and with the proper training.”

“Don’t I have the right to be angry, now?” Harry shouted. “You can’t order me around! Not only that, but you can’t be serious, either! If you want me to enjoy my childhood, how will I train for whatever so-called issue you claim I have?”

“We will find time for that. But rest assured that I can give you a proper instruction. Remember that it’s for your own good, and that you will thank me later for that. Now, calm yourself. You will return to Hufflepuff’s quarters, and everything will be fine.”

“No.” Harry simply said, crossing his arms in a defiant attitude that was not out-of-place on a teenager.

“What?” the Headmaster asked, frowning.

“I said NO! And leave my thoughts alone!”

“ I won’t be spoken like that by a child, were he a Metamorphmagus!” Dumbledore exclaimed, missing the meaning behind Harry’s words. “Now, listen, here-”

“NO! You listen! You said that you made a mistake by hiring me yet you gave me the position based on what I did, not who I am. You said I ought to retrieve a proper and balance education... who told you I didn’t have one before? You think that all I can do is fight and change my appearance, huh? Have you even asked? And what gives you the right to force me to "enjoy my childhood" when Voldemort’s nearby? You don’t like my attitude? Tough! I happen to like me the way I am. I can control myself, and, except Voldemort and his merry morons, I – DON’T – HAVE – ISSUES!” A short pause, which Dumbledore didn’t break: while he was ranting at the Headmaster, Harry had grown in size, and he was now shouting with a volume comparable to Molly Weasley’s at her best – or worst.

“I don’t need your schooling, Dumbledore. As it is, it promotes rivalries between Houses, and every positive change must come from the students! You think that flaunting your Headmaster position will impress me, do you? You think you own the school? Well, here’s a newsflash: you don’t! Who do you think was able to Apparate through the school even though it was supposed to be impossible?”

“Jerry? But...”

“Yes, Jerry! The one you told the existence of the Prophecy to, under a wonderfully-worded Secrecy charm! The one who you owe your continued position to because he got rid of a Basilisk for you! The one who evacuated the Hogwarts Express in the nick of time! The one who warned you about Sinistra and who writes so insightful articles in the Daily Prophet! Jerry Patar Homest! Harry James Potter! ME!” Harry yelled, his eyes suddenly ablaze and his magic flaring. “AND YOU DARE ORDERING ME AROUND?”

A very long pause ensued, during which Harry reined his feelings and adjusted his height. Internally, he was a little ashamed at his outburst,

and he looked around to see if the others were angry at him. To his surprise, the members of the Order of the Phoenix were unmoving, as though frozen in time.

“I know righteous anger and I know innocence.” Raphael answered his unvoiced question. “I put them in a stasis while you address your... issues.”

Harry snorted, before blushing. “Sorry.”

“Do not be sorry, young man. It is not as though we didn’t know of humans’ lives.”

Harry acquiesced, before turning back to Dumbledore, who had merely digested what Harry had served him.

“I didn’t know...” the old man said. “I didn’t know.”

“And, classically, you made assumptions. I already spent some time in this school, Albus. I’m willing to pass OWLs or NEWTs of your choice if you push me on the standard circuit, but I will not be a pushover pawn. Try that and I disappear, and I leave you to deal with Voldemort. And don’t think you can retain me either: you had to wait for an archangel to find me...”

Dumbledore swallowed his pride and looked at Harry with weary old eyes. “I know I damaged whatever trust you have in me, Harry. I’m sorry, and, to be frank, I need you against Voldemort. How can I repair bridges between us?”

Harry sighed. “I think that the first thing you can do is keep my secrets.” he said. “I don’t want people like Voldemort knowing about my status.”

“I can do that.” Dumbledore said. “And I’m ready to vouch for the Order members as well.”

Harry snorted. “Actually, I don’t think you should do that.”

“What do you mean?” enquired Dumbledore, frowning at the boy’s words.

“Vouching for them: I don’t think you should.” Harry replied. “And it leads to my second request. I want you to teach Occlumency to the Order members, as soon as possible. And eventually include that in the curriculum as well.”

“Why? The Order is quite safe, as I reckon. And it’s too much of a complicated skill for mere students to grasp it.”

“You are wrong in those two assumptions. People like Mundungus are the kind to babble things into unwanted ears. And I’m sure that there is more behind your refusal to include this into the curriculum than the excuse of complexity. Students leaving Hogwarts are woefully unprepared to enter the outside world, and teaching this – among the other skills I am trying to give them through the clubs – would help them against things like the Imperius curse. Don’t you agree?”

The old man sighed again. It was something he was doing quite often nowadays. Thinking back, he knew that it had started two years ago, when he had discovered Harry’s disappearance. “I shall see who I can trust with that course.” he said. “There aren’t many teachers available, you know. It’s already difficult to find a replacement for professor Sinistra.”

Harry thought about it a little bit, before smiling widely. “I can use the Defence periods to start them on this.” he offered.

Dumbledore winced. “I don’t know how you plan to do so. Using the normal development plan for this skill, it would take a full year to do that.”

“Ah, but I have several skills I haven’t told you about yet.” Harry said mysteriously. “I’m sure that a little... push... in the right direction would make the lessons quicker and easier.” He paused. “Then, of course, you wouldn’t be able to sift through their minds as before.” He then looked at the old man in the eyes. “Was that why you didn’t want to

start this? Because you are used to read the students' minds? What about the teachers?"

Dumbledore had the grace to blush under the accusing glare the young boy was treating him with. "I'm sorry to plead guilty on both counts. I guess it's high time to change long-held beliefs and habits."

"As you say, it's high time. I was lucky to have been able to help against the attack on the train, and I would be sorry to retrieve only half of my students because they would have been unable to defend themselves." He paused, looking at the Headmaster shrewdly. "It's quite lonely, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"At the top. I think you spent too long without having someone challenging you. Against Voldemort and his accomplices, we need to ally for the Light to survive."

"You are right, of course. That's why I sought you, after all."

"No. I think you wanted me under your orders, Albus. Not as an equal." He shrugged. "Of course, I can't compare to your years of experience, but I have had enough run-ins with Voldemort – not counting the skill he imparted me with – to help you."

"I realize that, now, and I'm sorry to have misjudged you. Even knowing all the things you could do." Dumbledore said, before straightening up and extending his hand. "I'm willing to ally with you, Harry. For the Light."

"For the Light." Harry answered, shaking the wrinkled hand.

A pause ensued, while Dumbledore looked at the immobile members around them. He then frowned, and his gaze returned to Harry. "What do you know about Mundungus?"

"He gets himself sloshed up quite often in a bar in Knockturn Alley, and had already told half-secrets to unsavoury characters there."

“What do you propose?”

“Either you fire him, or you help him with that... issue. Or I do.”

The Headmaster glanced at the frozen man and frowned. “I could, yes, but he is quite useful when dealing with that kind of people.” He then looked at Harry, his frown still on his face. “How can I help him? You seemed to have an idea about it.”

Harry smiled. “Let’s say that I know how to do certain... things... with others’ mind. I don’t like it anymore, but there was a time when I used my powers for comfort, and I... kind of messed... with them.”

“You what?”

“Don’t judge me as dark already.” Harry snorted. “If I must remind you, you left me unchecked, and it was often my only way out of sticky situations.”

“Still...”

“Let me ask you something, Headmaster: what do you think of Rita’s new attitude?”

The old man was surprised at the non sequitur, but his mind quickly picked up the hidden piece of information in Harry’s question. “You did this to her?”

The boy shrugged. “I did. Now that I know more about the Dark Arts, I’m not particularly proud of this, but admit that she’s more useful that way.”

Dumbledore kept silent for several seconds, weighing his options. There weren’t many of them, and his indignation deflated. “Alright. I don’t expect you to do that again, right?”

“Right. Although I don’t promise never to do it again. I might find myself in situations where it’s the only way out again. But I’m sure not

to undergo such a complete makeover again. Some people might need a little push, though.” he finished, looking pointedly towards Mundungus.

It took a full minute for the Headmaster to reach a positive conclusion on that line of thoughts, and he sighed again. “Alright. I will do it, though. I don’t want you to shoulder more than your current load.”

Harry nodded, and the two of them fell in a companionable silence which lasted a couple minutes.

“Am I right to think that your family is safe?” Dumbledore asked suddenly.

“They are.” Harry answered, before smirking. “I might even give you my address in Switzerland, one of these days.”

“The Fidelius was your job?” Dumbledore asked, before shaking his head in disbelief. “Of course. You seem to be very protective, Harry.”

“I don’t want my family and my friends to suffer because of me.” the boy answered staunchly.

“Your friends... do your old school friends know about you?”

“Yes. I tutored them in Occlumency already, if you must know.”

“I see.”

Another pause ensued, before either of them moved again.

“Well, I think we can free the others.” Dumbledore said, looking at Raphael. “I thank you for your involvement here. I suppose that you are going to protect Harry?”

“It is my mission, Albus Dumbledore.” the winged creature answered simply.

“We haven’t discussed about what they should know.” Harry said suddenly, referring to the immobile members of the Order. “I think they know too much already, though.”

“I can make them forget the unnecessary bits, if you so choose.” Raphael intervened.

Dumbledore looked uneasy, but he knew that it was this or an exhausting session of fine-combed Legilimency with each of them. “Alright. I think we can roll back to when you arrived, Raphael, but I also think that some of us might like to stay in the circle of those who know.”

Harry nodded, and he turned to Raphael. “Can you exclude a few of them from this charm? You seem to have the same kind of knowledge Leo- a friend of mine has, so you know who I’m talking about.”

“Yes, I see who you are talking about. I will do as you wish, and we will meet in your quarters afterwards.”

A few seconds later, a white light erupted around several members, while others were left unscathed. For some, it was just a flicker, while some others were surrounded by blinding light. At the same time, Harry morphed back into his professor guise and sat back at his place. When it was finished, Raphael disappeared in a flash of light, and the discussion started from where they had left it.

“We don’t need to!” Molly Weasley exclaimed, her gaze going from Dumbledore to the other members. “What happens in India has nothing to do with the Order, and the Ministry has already sent a team there.”

Dumbledore blinked, and looked at Harry, who shrugged. The two of them noticed that a few members shook their head, as if to clear it from whatever memories Raphael had left.

‘You fine?’ Harry heard, and he noticed that Remus, like Sirius, was looking at him and Dumbledore.

‘Great.’ he answered, before chuckling internally when Molly started to berate Dumbledore for not listening to what she said. He then frowned. ‘I should ask Raphael about who knows, though.’

‘I know.’ came from Remus, and Sirius repeated the same things half a second later, causing the three of them to giggle – still internally.

A stern voice interrupted them. ‘If you don’t mind, I would like to be able to concentrate without your mental banter troubling me. And, by the way... I know, too.’

The three of them turned as one and looked at Dumbledore. The old man was smiling amusedly, and his infamous twinkle had returned to his eyes, making him appear younger. Harry nodded, and the Headmaster repeated the action, respect expressed and felt by both parties.

That night, in a hidden Egyptian temple...

The sight was horrible, and several Death Eaters recruits lost whatever little meal they had had earlier, before discreetly Vanishing it. The Dark Lord was torturing, again, and the screams of pain, mixed with the actual torture, were sickening for any normal person’s sanity.

But the Dark Lord wasn’t just anyone.

By physically and magically torturing the four returning followers, he had managed to almost kill one, impair the second’s sanity, and let the third die from his belly wound. Amycus’ dead eyes were looking straight at the ones of Travers’ sidekick – who was as good as dead already, a severe case of Cruciatus being known to cause that. He was whining incoherently on the marble floor, though, and Voldemort immediately saw to restore a "proper" state around him. One Killing Curse later, all the Death Eaters there knew that it wouldn’t be good for their continued existence to whine. Alecko wasn’t far from being mad, the Cruciatus curse not helping her head wound. Travers only owed his life to Jugson’s intrusion.

“How dare you interrupting me?” Voldemort shouted to the intruding follower. “Crucio!”

Internally, the Dark Lord knew that Jugson wouldn't have come if there wasn't something of importance going on, but he had to cast the Cruciatus on anyone interfering with his actions, at least for the decorum. Even though that particular Death Eater held a special part in his world-conquest plans.

He lifted the curse after a couple seconds. “What was it about?”

“The... dem... demons, my Lord!” the addressed follower panted.

An impatient swish of a massive tail. “What about them?”

“They are awake, my Lord.”

A pause. “Where are they?”

“Still in the infirmary, my Lord. They didn't listen to me when I told them you were here. They were... occupied.”

Voldemort frowned at this unexpected turn of phrase. “In what way?”

“They were... Bellatrix and Derrick... they aren't the same. And they... jumped on each other.”

“They fought?”

“No, my Lord.” Jugson swallowed, blushing. “My Lord forgive me, I wanted to say that they jumped at each other. They were going at it when I left, my Lord.”

The silence following that declaration was so intense that one could have heard a pin drop. The serpentine creature slowly turned towards Malfoy, who had been observing from the shadows. The formerly blond man just shrugged.

“Fetch them.”

Malfoy nodded, and left the room.

It took him five minutes, but he eventually came back with the three of them. Derrick was walking with an assured gait, and his muscular chest was bared for the world to see. There were twenty-odd followers in the room, most of them heterosexual males, but the sight made all of them suddenly wish they weren't – either heterosexual or male. The demon was exuding an alluring aura which made the mere humans around him lose their normal thoughts.

Malfoy was walking a little behind him, and it was visible to the Dark Lord that it was a mark of deference. Behind them came Bellatrix, and the twenty followers gaped at the sight, drool dripping from their mouth, now. She was strutting... naked. Her already beautiful body had been enhanced by the potion, and, as she walked forward, some particular attributes became even more visible: she had a pair of bat-like wings protruding from her back, and a tail was extending her shapely spine.

Snape was several yards behind her, and his appearance caused a shock to the assembly. They had seen people enhanced by the potion, but the man that was approaching hadn't been enhanced at all. Gone was the gliding walk: he was walking using a staff, even stopping at times, leaning on it and coughing uncontrollably. Some could even see blood coming from his mouth when he coughed. His face was pallid and his hair even more dishevelled than normal, falling in front of his face and hiding most of it. It was grey, too, instead of the customary oily black he was sporting before.

When they were all on the dais, Voldemort looked at them enquiringly. “Welcome. As it isn't polite to associate with unnamed allies, I shall start the round of introductions. I am Lord Voldemort, the most powerful Dark Lord in the world, and I will rule it soon. Here is Malfoy, or Conquest. Who are you and what happened to Snape?”

“You humans call me Asmodai.” Derrick answered proudly. “I am the demon prince of Lust, and willing to ally with you for your current task.”

“It is an honour.” Voldemort inclined his head – Voldemort never bowed to anyone, but he couldn’t lack the respect due to an archdemon. “How comes you came here rather than any other demons?”

“I was the closest one. After the initial Summon, I was able to escape my bounds and land in this body.”

“Bounds?”

“Although I don’t want to hear about it again, I can tell you that an arch- some alliance of powers bound me in this country.”

Voldemort nodded and turned towards the winged female before him.

“I am-” Bellatrix started, but when she uttered her name, the unearthly sound made all humans wince, pressing their hands to their ears. “I am a Succubus.” she finished, unfazed by the reaction around her.

“Thank you for joining us. If you allow, we will still call you Bellatrix, so as the worms around us can understand.” Voldemort said, and she shrugged noncommittally. He then turned towards Snape. “What about you?”

“I shall remain unnamed.” the Potion Master wheezed, before coughing again.

“Like Bellatrix here, I will keep calling you Severus Snape, then. Why are you so... wretched? What are you?”

“I am a human, but not from this world.” Snape answered, earning himself disapproving frowns from the three demons, an inquisitive gaze from Voldemort, and gasps from the followers. He continued,

his voice almost inaudible and his discourse punctuated by coughing fits. “I travelled the Ab- the Hell of my world, and, after finally sealing its entries to prevent the destruction of that world, I found a way to escape Takh- to escape, and ended up in the Hell of this world. The power of the potion brought me out.”

“And... what can you do?” Voldemort asked, a little miffed at having replaced his Potion Master by that waste of a human being.

“I am an Archmage.” the man answered, trying to straighten up. His move made him wince, but he was able to look the Dark Lord in the eye, and the dark lord did a double take. The man’s eyes were yellow, and his pupils weren’t round, nor were there snake-like like his: they were a little like the ones some animals – goats among them – displayed, although vertically instead of horizontally. As they were, they strongly reminded him of... hourglasses.

“Interesting. We don’t have that kind of rank here, so it must come from your world. I gather that you can cast spells, right? What kind of spell?”

Snape almost chuckled, but a coughing fit forbade him to. “If I can cast spells... yes, of course. All kind of spells. A couple of them will create golems. Some will make molten stones raining from the sky, others will freeze an area or make it burst in flames... I know hundreds of spells.”

“Can you demonstrate?”

The man visibly deflated. “Not right now, no. I need to rest, first, and I will need to brew some restorative draught for my lungs.”

Some particularly stupid Death Eater snorted at this, and Snape turned his gaze towards him. “I would see you travel between worlds and spend your time in Hell. See how crippled you’d be.”

He then turned back to Voldemort, who had his one eye staring at the insulting follower. “I have just found the one test subject for your spells, whenever you are ready, Severus.”

The follower blanched and gulped but Snape merely nodded, before being shown to his quarters while the demons discussed with the Dark Lord about a test of their abilities.

The next day...

Harry had spent a good part of the night discussing with Raphael about everything, and he arrived quite late for breakfast. As soon as he sat, though, Flamel pushed the morning's Daily Prophet towards him, and Harry saw that the front page was covering the events in India. Stunned by the sheer number of casualties, he spent the remaining of the breakfast reading the few articles about the earthquake, and forgot to eat.

Since he still had his reporter streak about him, he decided to write a quick article correcting a few mistakes here and there, while not giving away too much information either. After a quick mental chat with Flamel and then with Dumbledore, both men gave him their approbation – it wasn't that he was seeking approval, but he knew that they could advise him wisely.

That's why, that afternoon, a future self of Harry Potter – disguised as Jerry Homest – could be seen entering the Daily Prophet head office. The deal was made quickly, and Harry found himself in the street soon afterwards, one article lighter and several dozen Galleons heavier. 'Since I'm here already, let's check the mailbox. Bill – Raphael – told me the Death Eaters fed him with the potion, so they must have kidnapped him. Was it because he sent me something?'

He then Apparated out, morphed into his Harvey Jefferson persona, and entered the post office. A few minutes later – and an hour earlier too: Harry turned time back in order to inconspicuously spend the meal in the Great Hall with everybody – Harry was back in Hogwarts, opening his letter. Apparently, Bill had found several pointers towards Wadjet's temple, and Harry knew he would spend some time in Egypt soon.

In the meantime, there was something he wanted to discuss with Remus and Sirius.

That evening, he Apparated to the Shrieking Shack, from where he took the portal to Sirius' family house in London.

"Hey, Moony! Look who's there!" Sirius barked, earning himself two glares.

Harry smiled. "Good evening, gentlemen."

"Gentlemen? Us? Never!"

Remus rolled his eyes. "Speak for yourself, Padfoot."

"Truly, Moony... I don't recall you having a steady girlfriend either. If at all!" the addressed man said, laughing good-naturedly to remove the sting from his words.

Remus smiled. "You'd be surprised." he said softly.

Sirius stopped laughing and looked at his friend with wide eyes. "You have?"

"I have been so long without one." Remus said, looking at his feet. "You know, it's kind of difficult when you are a werewolf. Since I'm not one anymore, I feel better."

"That's an understatement or I'm not Sirius!" Sirius exclaimed.

"You are never serious." Harry quipped, earning himself a wide grin from his godfather and a roll of eyes from Remus.

"Oh, Moony, the boy takes after me! I'm so pleased!" A short pause. "But you won't evade me like that. Who is she? How long? Do I know her? What does she do? Did you do the-"

"Padfoot!" Remus exclaimed, and Harry had the feeling that the dog Animagus had been interrupted just in time for the conversation to stay pleasant.

“How could you hide that to me, your friend?” Sirius asked, wiping mock tears from his eyes. “I could have given you all sorts of advices!”

“Precisely. I want to keep things slow, and she agrees with me. Besides, we are both virg- err... sorry, Harry.” he said, blushing. “Forgot you were there for a bit.”

“Ew!” Harry exclaimed. “Too much information!”

Sirius was grinning widely, though. “Awww... isn’t it cute? I think it’s high time for me to give The Talk to my two young and inexperienced charges. Right?”

“No!” Harry and Remus shouted in unison.

But Sirius wasn’t listening, and he Summoned a bottle of firewhisky from the cupboard. “My father disliked me, so it was Uncle Alphard who gave it to me, and he said that it was a tradition to do it over a glass or three.” He smiled. “Since we’re three...”

Harry and Remus looked at each other, and they didn’t have to speak mentally to understand each other’s thoughts: ‘Let him follow that slope, and he’ll embarrass himself soon enough.’

Two hours later, three completely drunk individuals were bantering about sex and past experiences – which were relatively limited for two of them. Remus had confessed pining for Tonks, and Harry had admitted liking Tracey very much also.

Harry being drunk was something unusual. When he had been pranked by the twins, with the whole Slytherin table, it had been sudden and his mind hadn’t been focused. The Talk he received was quite different. During the conversation, several strange things happened, like a flying pink elephant – a real one – materializing out of thin air, and pictures worthy of the Kamasutra appearing on the kitchen walls – thankfully, Harry wasn’t in the proper state to care for details, and the people on these pictures were unrecognisable.

When they wondered what the Order would think if they saw these, Remus and Sirius tried to dispel them, but failed repeatedly, and Remus looked at Harry, who was dozing peacefully. A quick sobering charm later, the three of them could hold a proper discussion again.

“Harry? Can you dispel these pictures?” Remus asked.

The addressed teen – he had morphed back into himself at some point – looked at the pictures and blinked. And he blushed. “Oh my. I drew these?”

“Seems so, Prongslet.” Sirius said, before approaching the drawings. “And, if I get real close, I think I can recognize a tuft of black hair here and there, and... Merlin!” he exclaimed, stepping away from the offending wall.

“You recognize Merlin in these pictures?” Remus asked, smiling.

“No.” he answered. “It’s just that... they move.”

“They move?”

“They move.”

The two of them looked at Harry who was looking at the pictures, a look of concentration on his face. Unlike the state he had been in after Fred and George’s joke, Harry discovered that he could actually remember the stupid things he had done. Despite being drunk, he hadn’t been as inebriated as last time, and stayed mostly in control. His memories gave him insights about how to address magic differently, and there clearly was an interest in moving pictures: class – although not Sex Ed; he wasn’t going to do that.

Harry took his Nundu wand out and easily dispelled the pictures – he had created them, so the charms recognized his magical signature and removed themselves from the wall.

As for the pink elephant... like all conjured creatures, it had the right to live, and Harry changed its colour and then Apparated with it, dropping it in a nearby zoo. It was a perfectly viable elephant, after all.

When he came back, Remus looked at him shrewdly and asked him a question. "I'm sure you didn't come here for the sole reason of being subjected to The Talk by Sirius."

Harry grimaced. "Although it was informative, it wasn't the kind of talk I had in mind, no."

"So? What did you want to speak about?"

"Dementors. And the Patronus Charm."

A pause.

"Were we in a party, I'd say he's a mood killer." Sirius stated.

Harry started to apologize, but Remus interrupted him. "Don't you have our memories of it?"

"I have the memories of teaching it, but, as I was reviewing the lesson plan for the seventh year, I found that I didn't have the memories of casting it..."

"...and that would be difficult to teach it if you can't cast it, I agree." Remus finished, before turning pensive. "You know, we taught that charm, but it isn't normally on the curriculum."

"You mean to say that people out there won't have any defences should Dementors escape Azkaban and walk the country?"

The two of them nodded sadly. "We tried to teach them, but, as they knew what was on the curriculum and what wasn't, they weren't really cooperative. Especially swamped as they were, with homework from the other courses."

Harry smiled. "I think that my introduction to the course will force them to hear me out."

"What did you do?" Sirius asked, an interested gleam in the eye.

Harry proceeded in telling them what he did in the first week, and, when he finished, the two were howling with laughter.

"Words to remember, Moony." Sirius said, patting his friend's shoulder. "This little one will put the wizarding world on its head."

"And back on its feet afterwards, I believe." Remus finished, smiling. "That was interesting and... great, Harry."

"Thank you."

"Want a particular memory of mine?" Remus asked, and Harry nodded, before fetching the proffered block from the ex-werewolf's mind.

"Now, if you saw how this block is linked to the memories around it in my mind," Remus continued, "you'll notice that you have to do the same in your mind: link it with your happiest memory."

Harry spent half a minute browsing his happy memories before speaking again. "Why would I choose only one memory?" he asked out of the blue.

"What do you mean, Harry?" Sirius asked.

"I mean that we could make a memory hub, linking several happy memories to the Patronus charm. What do you think?"

Remus frowned thoughtfully, but he was nodding slowly. Sirius, as the more physical of the two Marauders, decided to haul Harry on his feet. "Let's try that! But not here... I don't want another elephant in my kitchen, thank you very much."

They went to the lounge and sat on the floor there. "Alright, Harry. Let's start with the normal one... Have you found a happy memory yet?"

Harry nodded, and, copying the wand move from the memory, he spoke the incantation. "Expecto Patronum!"

Nothing happened.

Or rather, the spell didn't work.

Something happened to Harry, though: he grimaced and his hands started to move to his head, but he collapsed before he could reach it.

Half a second later, Raphael appeared next to him, his wings folded behind him. Sirius absently remarked that the angel couldn't expand them completely, even in the larger room. Without even greeting the two men, he put his hands onto Harry's head. The teen's body started to glow, with his head giving off a much brighter light than the rest of him. After several anxious seconds, the light faded away, and the angel looked at Remus. "What happened?"

"He tried the Patronus charm." the man replied simply, and Raphael nodded.

Sirius stopped gnawing at his nails to ask Raphael his question. "What happened to him?"

"I suspect that he put too much power in his Occlumency wards. Occlumency and the charm you call Patronus are quite incompatible unless a proper approach is taken."

"What do you mean?"

"I think it interests Harry as well, so we will wake him up before I answer." the celestial being answered before moving to Harry and gently doing that.

“Wha...?” Harry said, before looking around him. He registered Raphael’s presence and smiled, before noticing something. Frowning, he closed his eyes and concentrated. A second later, his eyes flew open and he looked at the angel with surprise, confusion, and fear in his eyes. “What happened?”

“I had to remove your mental barriers.” Raphael said simply. “When one casts the Patronus, it sends magical energy from the mind straight out of the body, where it can assume a shape. The problem with Occlumency is that it can block the Patronus. Since those two abilities are rarely practised together, what happened is a rare case, and I do not think it is even documented.”

“What would happen if someone was to learn and practise the Patronus before Occlumency?” Remus asked.

Raphael seemed to think about it before answering. “It simply wouldn’t be possible for that person to practice Occlumency. Once the spell is done right, there is a current of energy linking the memory of the Patronus charm to the wand hand, and this current will help the future invocations. And this current acts against all attempts to build Occlumency defences. They would need the help of a Legilimens to inhibit the spell and even help them with the construction of the defences.”

He paused, and turned back to Harry. “In your case, your defence was so tight that it reflected the Patronus energy back in your mind. Do you feel energized?”

“Why... yes! It’s... it’s impressive!” Harry exclaimed, his expression suddenly ecstatic.

The archangel shook his head gently. “You are lucky I was there, Harry. Had I not removed your defences in time, the energy would have reflected indefinitely, eventually destroying your mind.”

Harry visibly deflated. “I should thank you, then. Thank you very much, Raphael. I guess I won’t cast that spell anymore, then.”

“Why?” asked Remus.

Harry shivered. “I feel so... naked without my defences. The first thing I want to do now is to rebuild them. In fact, I’m so energized that I could spend the night doing so.”

Raphael shook his head and put his hand on his shoulder. “There’s no need to do that, nor is there a need to forbid yourself from using the Patronus. After all, you will eventually notice that it is a very useful spell. But you have to adapt your defences to allow the magic to leave.”

Harry was pensive. “A sort of one-way frontier... yes... I could do that...”

“In the meantime, since you have no barrier right now, why not practise the Patronus with your friends? I will stay with you, and I will help rebuilding your defences afterwards.”

“Thank you again, Raphael.”

The angel nodded, before stepping back, and Harry held his wand firmly. “Expecto Patronum!”

This time, Harry didn’t collapse, and a silvery mist came out of his wand.

“Great, Harry!” Sirius exclaimed, patting a smiling Harry’s back. “Few wizards succeed in obtaining a result like that in their first try.”

“And few wizards succeed in even getting it to be corporeal later on.” Remus said, reminding them that there was an aim to reach.

“What do you mean, corporeal?” Harry asked, before the memories provided by the two Marauders kicked in. “Oh. Right. That mist should transform into an animal. Well... no time like the present. Expecto Patronum!”

The result was still mist escaping his wand and fading in the room's atmosphere.

“Have you chosen your happiest memory?” Remus asked.

Harry frowned. “Well, I don't know. When I chose it, we were speaking of linking several, and I just chose a happy one at random between all of those I selected. Can I try to link several of them right now?” he asked, completely missing Raphael's smile at the same time.

“Try to find a happier one first.” Remus said.

Harry complied, and, after a few minutes, he straightened up and repeated the incantation. “Expecto Patronum!”

This time, the mist that escaped his wand had a shape, and the three humans gasped. Remus was the first to recover, and he prodded Harry. “Try a happier one. Try to find the happiest.”

Harry closed his eyes, and he spent several minutes parsing all his memories and comparing their inherent happiness to the last one he had selected. Only few could compete, and most of them were related to Tracey. He selected the memory of a particular chat with her, wondering why he hadn't searched in that direction first. He knew the answer, though: he hadn't thought that romance was such a shortcut towards happiness – especially after the crude talk he had had from Sirius.

When he opened his eyes, he was ready. And blushing. He spoke the incantation and, in front of his eyes, a stag erupted from his wand, before galloping around the room. It stopped next to the humans, though, looking at them in confusion before disappearing.

“Prongs...” breathed Sirius, and Remus looked at where the stag had been, a happy-but-sad expression on his face too.

Harry frowned, a memory stirring in his mind. It was of Remus teaching: ‘The Patronus charm helps you fight against the darkness

by summoning magic in his purest form.’ and he answered a question relative to the animal shape. ‘Studies have shown that, bar a few exceptions, a Patronus has the same shape in members of the same family. Said studies have made parallels between the term "patronym" and the charm’s incantation and name. They didn’t find any reason for the exceptions, though.’

“Was that... my dad?” he asked them.

“That was Prongs’ Animagus shape, hence the name.” Sirius answered in a wavering voice, which he straightened with a cough. “We never saw him perform the Patronus, so we don’t know if it would have been the same.”

“Chances are that they would, given the theories around the charm.” Remus added, and Harry nodded.

“Why did it look at us that way, before disappearing?”

The Marauders looked at each other, but it was Raphael who answered. “It found no enemy to fight, so it was wondering. And it didn’t exactly disappear: it returned to your magic reserve. It is possible to cast the spell several times over and have multiple animals frolicking around, but that eats your reserve of magic, and your other spells won’t be as efficient.”

Harry looked at him, and then at the two adults. There were two things he wanted to test, now, but one would have to wait until he rebuilt his defences. In the meantime...

He closed his eyes again, and went to his mind, where he knotted links between his happiest memories and the Patronus-related memory. It took him five more minutes, and, when he emerged, Remus and Sirius were looking at him nervously. Raphael was smiling, and he merely nodded.

“What did you do, now?” Remus asked.

To answer, Harry turned to the side and cast the spell.

The result was above and beyond what they thought. As Occlumency was a part of Legilimency, and as it blocked the Patronus, no one before had thought to use the mind arts to link several happy memories to the charm.

The stag that erupted from his wand was completely corporeal, not ghostly like his previous one. And it was tangible, his hooves thundering on the parquet. And it was... completely white. And luminous. As if it was a lamp made of pure alabaster. As the previous one, it looked around before coming back to the humans with a confused look. It didn't disappear, though.

After several seconds, Harry asked the question. "When does it disappear?"

"When you order him to, Harry." Raphael answered from behind him, and Harry started in surprise.

"Why?"

"It's your magic in there. It seems that, in this shape, it is more able to communicate with you. You can direct the shape vocally, and you will eventually learn to communicate with it mentally."

Harry nodded, and approached the noble beast to pet it. "It's strange..." he marvelled. "It's so soft... and tingly at the same time."

"The tingle comes from your magic. I do not recommend to anyone but your closest friends to pet it." Raphael explained. "That kind of Patronus can protect you against more than the Dementors, Harry. Remember not to cast too many of them at the same time, though, if you want to stay conscious."

Harry nodded, before testing his abilities to send orders to his Patronus.

Harry was keyed up, and, even though he returned to his quarters in Hogwarts, he couldn't put himself to sleep – short of Stunning himself,

something he wasn't prone to. Besides, he had something to do, and he smiled when he noticed that Raphael was already there.

"You said you were ready to help?" he asked, and the angel nodded.

Harry sat comfortably on his bed and went to his mind, quickly followed by the angel. The two of them worked hard and long, and came up with something that resembled a real mind – once more, although he made a low fence around it – but with numerous spellwork embedded in it. Harry's memories were held in an invisible cube, designed to make them invisible as well, and which had enough empty space to fill ten times what Harry already had. Said cube hovered over the mind structure itself, held in place by the consciousness building, the connection to which allowed him to use his memories efficiently despite their unusual location. The subterranean part of his mind was used as well, with other memories, as well as unusual contraptions, like kennels for his defensive creatures. These belonged to the active defence part of his mind, and they would unleash the contained creatures on any unauthorized attack. All of these beasts were also spelled like the previous dragons had been, allowing them to be revived should they fall.

There was also another type of creature the two of them devised, and which would act as mentally biological weapons: mosquitoes.

After his past talks with James and Copycat, Harry had thought about viruses for a long time, and, over the night, Harry and Raphael had come up with an appropriate shape, the appropriate behaviour, and the appropriate spells to put on them. Once unleashed – Harry wouldn't let them out without his express consent –, the mosquitoes had the simple task of finding any intruder and following the link toward that person's mind, duplicating and establishing themselves there.

Exactly what they would be doing there would depend on their orders. They could harass the recipient's mind, thus paralysing his thoughts and then his body. They could attack the consciousness building and threaten the consciousness so that it would act according to a given scenario – mainly: helping Harry. They could even make themselves explode, eventually bringing down whatever defences they might find

in the way – or destroying themselves if they were going to be studied by a powerful Legilimens. They could emit a mental signal towards Harry, so that he would know where the infected persons were. And their last and most dangerous order was the propagation – the possibility to jump like that from one mind to another.

Knowing about computer virus infestation problems from his cousin and his friend, Harry had a perfect solution for pinpointing the Dark Lord's hiding place, and to deal with the Death Eaters whenever said Dark Lord was taken care of.

Raphael made a last effort in Harry's mind defences by spelling the whole content of it with a slowness spell, which would be triggered by intruders reaching its inner part – so as to slow them on their way out. Harry, of course, wouldn't be affected by it, and neither would his mind creatures. Harry himself created the same kind of shield he had experienced when fighting the witch's mind in Rome: a sturdy dome establishing itself around the mind when an intrusion was detected.

When Harry opened his eyes again, the sun was already rising, and, despite having been energized beforehand, he was quite tired. He toyed with the idea of going back in time, but Raphael proposed something which intrigued him.

“Do you want a bath?”

“A bath?”

“It is one of the most satisfying customs the mortals have taken from us. Especially when done properly.”

Harry was quite intrigued: for him, bathing oneself was only to get cleaned, and he never spent a second thought on it. He acquiesced. “Alright, let's try that.”

Raphael led him in the bathroom, where he enlarged the tub and shaped it differently. Several seconds later, it was full to the brink with hot and frothy water which smelled of... incense?

“Why the scent?” Harry asked, quite put out by its strength.

“Oh, it was just a habit. You want something else?”

“Yes. Just... anything fresh. And natural.”

A second later, the scent was replaced with one that could be smelled in a light forest at dawn – green and full of promises.

Harry had closed his eyes to inhale the refreshing bouquet, and he opened his eyes afterwards. Only to close them at once. “What are you doing?” he asked, clearly shocked at having seen the angel disrobe.

“How are you going to wash and relax if you are alone? I know that, with your powers, you can wash your own back. I’m only here to help.”

Harry was clearly reluctant. He had never shared physical intimacy with anyone, and, knowing that the angel was ready to take a bath with him was clearly against all his mental habits – especially as they were both male.

“Don’t worry.” he heard Raphael say from his right. “I’m not a sex demon. I won’t take advantage of you. If you must know, I won’t even react to you. Satisfied?” When the silence continued, he spoke again. “Sorry. I can feel your reluctance. I will leave.”

“No!” Harry blurted out. “I mean... there’s nothing going on besides a relaxing bath, right?”

“Right.”

“Well... I will do it, then.” Straightening up, Harry followed Raphael’s example and disrobed before entering the water.

One hour later, Harry was completely relaxed and rejuvenated, and he was ready to start the day.

As they were both putting their clothes on, Raphael asked him a question. "Ready to test your theory?"

It took Harry several seconds to understand what he was talking about, but, when he did, he smiled widely. He then concentrated, and his mind assumed his previous name of Kentaro Anderson, a name he had associated with the Smilodon – perhaps wrongly, but he didn't care at that point.

"Here comes nothing." He murmured. "Expecto Patronum!"

And, following his theory, his mind provided the useful information for his Patronus-casting memory to throw the magical energy out of it in the shape of a... sabre-toothed tiger. Harry smiled before petting it, earning himself a deep rumble as the beast purred.

"Well... that's interesting." he said, and his smile evolved into a smirk. "They will never know what hit them."

To be continued in next chapter: Battlefields...

In this chapter, we all saw
Dumbledore reap what he sow.
Some more mistakes he will do
Before he'll be clean as dew.

Chapter 30 – Battlefields
posted February 8th, 2006

At five that Thursday, Harry started the fencing club in an unusual way.

“Welcome back.” he said, and pointed to the wooden box he had placed on the only desk of the room – his. “Here are badges, much like the ones for the Prefects. They contain seven empty spots, arrayed in a circle, and each of these spots will possibly receive a pin representing your participation in one of the fighting clubs. These pins come in several "colours" depending on your level in these clubs: pewter means novice; bronze means intermediate; and then you have silver and gold for the advanced levels.

“On top of this, these pins appear different for each club. For instance, the pin for today’s club shows a sword and a shield. In the future, access to the training rooms for the different clubs will be keyed to the appropriate pins. I have spoken to the Headmaster, and he agreed to consider your participation and your progression in these clubs as extra credit for Defence. As such, I can give you points, and I will start by doing so if you participate to the meetings.” Harry knew it was quite underhanded, but it was the best way he had found to raise the number of people participating.

“Of course, nothing prevents you from adhering to the other fighting clubs. You know, however, that participating means exactly that: participation. Students just being there won’t receive points. Now... yes, Miss Granger?”

“You said seven spots, sir, but there are only six clubs, aren’t there?”

“Precisely. I wish to introduce another club, opened to those taking fencing and unarmed fighting already, or those who are already proficient in both. It will be called Bushido, or the Warrior’s Way. It will involve learning of a new lifestyle, and-”

“Such as?” a Slytherin pureblood wizard – whose last name happened to be Derrick – asked.

Harry merely moved, and the tip of his katana blade found itself resting under the teen’s chin. “Politeness, for one part,” he started, looking the teen in the eye, “although I already made it clear that I disliked any kind of disrespect. It was in the first Defence course, by the way.” He smiled and held his katana up for all to see. “And the club will also be about fighting with another kind of weapons.”

“That was cheat-”

“Don’t complete that sentence, Mister Derrick.” Harry said sternly. “You have Fencing and rules thereof, and then, you have fighting with a sword, which is my goal here. If you disagree, you can choose the hard way, or the harder way: fight one of our dummies, or fight me – the challenge to defeat me is still open.”

“Dummies, sir?” Ron asked – inwardly, the boy knew it was Harry there, but he had to display some decorum in classes.

“Yes, Mister Weasley. A new addition to the clubs, addition which I have been unable to provide until a few days ago. As some of you may know, these are charmed mannequins which will fight you with as much skill as you display. They are like the dummies I set up at the term’s beginning, but they will fight back.”

For the rest of the two-hour club, Harry introduced them to the dummies, and a few fights took place. Everyone was impressed to see Ron dispatch the dummy in two quick jabs. Derrick followed, a scowl on his face, and he swished his sword right and left expertly before falling into position. To his dismay, the dummy started to swish his sword skilfully as well. A dozen seconds later, Derrick was flat on his back, the blunted-out pointy end of the mannequin’s sword against his chest.

“As I said,” Harry said, “they react to the skill you display. In a real fight, it is essential to hide your skills. You can display some, in order to impress the enemy, but be sure to keep some behind your belt.”

Derrick grumbled, but accepted Harry's helping hand to stand up, and the bell rang at that moment.

After dinner, Harry brought his friends in his quarters, and told them about him coming clear with Dumbledore about his identity. Afterwards, the four students spent an hour absorbing some memories Harry wanted them to have, most of them being related to fighting. It wasn't really cheating since it mainly involved the clubs, where there was no formalized competition.

He just wanted them to have a better survival chance should they stumble in a conflict.

He also asked them about their progress with the Animagus transformation – since he had learnt about it, almost a month before, he had told them about it, and had seen with Remus so as to brew the potion for his friends. They were in various state of success, Hermione and Tracey being in the lead since they had spent quite a long time researching their shape already. Harry went to the minds of Ron and Ginny to help them, but it was much more difficult to do so while in another's mind, and the two of them only managed to be covered in fur once.

“I can help them, if you want.” a melodious voice said, and the four students jumped in fright.

Ron and Ginny were even more surprised to find a winged version of their oldest brother appearing in Harry's quarters. Raphael presented himself and filled in the blanks of Harry's tale. He reassured them about their brother's fate as well, telling them that he was temporarily lodged in Heavens, and that he'd return to his body as soon as it was feasible.

Around nine, someone knocked at the door, and Harry, who had morphed in his teenaged self, went to the door and asked Cassie about who had knocked. When he knew that it was Dumbledore, he opened the door wide and smiled. “Hi there, Albus. Is there...”

He then stopped and noticed that the Headmaster wasn't alone. He wanted to reprimand Cassie, but quickly realized that it was his wording that had been wrong – he had asked who knocked, not who was there. It didn't prevent him from berating himself, though.

Amelia Bones was there, and her niece was with her.

“Who are you?” Susan asked.

“You mean you don't know?” Dumbledore asked, clearly confused.

Thinking that the corridor wasn't the best place for that kind of encounter, Harry entered his quarters wordlessly, motioning the trio to follow him in. As soon as the door closed, he addressed the Headmaster in a less-than-flowery language that made Susan blush and Amelia frown. His reproach finished, Harry crossed his arms and looked at Dumbledore crossly.

The formidable woman had found her voice back, though. “How dare you address Albus Dumbledore like that, boy!” she exclaimed. “You will apologize this instant!”

“Amelia...” Dumbledore started.

“I won't have mere teenagers address you in that way, Albus. Why don't you expel him for that?”

“I can't expel him, Amelia.”

“Why?”

“Because I'm not a student.” Harry answered, in his Henry Evans voice – and shape, which he had grown into while the two were discussing.

Susan recognized the man as her Defence teacher and she grinned: she had always gotten well along in his class, unexpectedly – Defence hadn't been her forte before, if at all, but the new teacher had a way of teaching which made the course easier.

“Harry...” Dumbledore started, but Harry interrupting him, his arm swiping through the air.

“Haven’t you learnt anything already, Albus? Must I un-tell you things?” his eyes flashed.

Dumbledore gulped, the warning hitting home. After all, he knew that Jerry had been able to outsmart him several times, so... Harry?

“Sorry... Henry.”

His slip of tongue wasn’t going to stay unnoticed for long, because someone called from the next room. “Who was it, Harry?”

And Tracey entered the antechamber, her bare feet pattering on the stone – which was charmed to stay warm and comfortable, mind you.

Several reactions happened at the same time. Harry rolled his eyes, mentally berating himself for his carelessness – again – while Susan’s expression hardened. Amelia frowned disapprovingly at the fact that a teenage girl was so casual in a teacher’s living quarters, and Dumbledore smiled benignly at the whole scene.

Harry spoke first, addressing the annoying Headmaster. “Before I allow more breaches, Albus, I’d like to know the purpose of your visit.”

“As you might know, Amelia here has retrieved her position at Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and I felt that she ought to know – from the source – what really happened in India.”

“Not satisfied with the Prophet, are you?” Harry asked rhetorically. “You might prefer tomorrow’s edition, Albus. I know Jerry sent something.”

“I always thought a little chat was more informative.” The man answered, shrugging.

Harry glanced at Susan for a second and decided to continue the discussion mentally. 'And... why bring Susan?'

'I thought she was your friend.'

'Yes, she was. With Harold Thompson.'

'Oh.' Dumbledore seemed to deflate, before recovering his amused expression again. 'But isn't it better to come clean now rather than doing these monthly trips to Brazil to get those magnificent birds?'

Harry sighed, before nodding. "Alright, then. Follow me. And try not to gape."

Despite his warning, the two Bones found themselves with their mouths wide open at the scene.

Here stood an adult with large feathery white wings, looking every aspect of his true angelic nature, and he was supervising what appeared like a badger and a fox. When Ron and Ginny popped back from their animal shapes, they were grinning widely, an expression the Headmaster mimicked genially, before remembering that Harry was in a tight position.

Harry waved his wand, and additional chairs were Transfigured from firewood and Levitated in place.

"Got to work on your Conjuraton..." Dumbledore started, but Harry threw him a dark glance, and the old man preferred to stop.

"Since I didn't see fit to install a spying glass behind my door," Harry started sarcastically, "I find myself in the unenviable situation where I must come clear with several of my secrets. Again." He then prodded Amelia's mind a little and smiled. "I know that Madam Bones can keep a secret, but I'd like you, Susan, to stay after she leaves. I have to teach you something before you can leave as well."

"What is it?" she asked in a small voice.

“It’s a small skill that allows you to dissimulate secrets from prying minds.” Harry said with a pointed look towards Dumbledore, who had the grace to blush.

Amelia had followed the conversation, though, and she intruded quite strongly. “How can you hope to teach Susan Occlumency? It’s not even taught in the first year of the Auror program!”

“I think the next Auror recruits will surprise you, then.” Harry said coldly, before smirking as a thought took hold of him. “Do you know Legilimency?”

“Of course I do.” she huffed. “It should be mandatory for people with my responsibilities.”

“I couldn’t agree more on that.” Harry muttered, before motioning towards his friends. “Pick one.”

“What do you mean?”

“Pick one of them and try the spell on them.”

“I can’t do that! I need an authorization from their guardians before trying such an invasive spell.”

Harry frowned, before smiling. He then glanced at Tracey, who nodded. “If you say so, cast it on Tracey, here. I am her guardian, now, unfortunately – for her.”

“You?” Dumbledore blurted out, but a stare from Harry quieted him.

After several seconds, the strong woman nodded and cast the spell. After discovering that she wasn’t able to pass through Tracey’s defences, her eyes went wide and she looked at Dumbledore. “How is that even possible?”

“I don’t know, Amelia.” he answered. “But I think it assures you that it is possible that Susan learns it.”

While stowing her wand away, she nodded and returned to the topic of the conversation. "Alright. Now that you know we can keep your secrets, what are they?"

"I'm teaching Defence under Henry Evans' identity."

"What's so secret about it?"

Harry morphed his features. "I'm a reporter for the Daily Prophet under Jerry Homest's name."

She gasped. "I know you! I told you about... so that's your true identity?"

"No." he morphed again. "I'm Tracey's guardian, under Harvey Jefferson's personality."

"But..."

Once again, his features changed, and his size diminished. "I was a second year Slytherin student here, under the guise of Kentaro Anderson – even if I played Malfoy for a while."

Dumbledore gasped. There were some bits of information he hadn't been aware of.

"I remember you." Susan said. "You arrived in second year. They said you were..."

"Dead, yes." he answered. "I had to simulate this."

"What about the body? And your father?" Dumbledore asked, trying to figure the missing pieces.

"The body was a Death Eater I transfigured during the attack. And my so-called father is in fact my mentor in certain... arts." he finished meekly, and Tracey snorted.

While he sent her a mock glare, Susan was frowning and looking at him, trying to find her preferred teacher's real identity. "How old are you?" she finally asked.

"Ah. That's the 1000-Galleon question, isn't it? I won't answer it now, though, because I'm not done with my identities. You will forgive me to keep some of them secret, and, Susan, I hope you will forgive me for being such a git towards you."

"What do you-?" she started to ask, and her mouth stopped moving when he morphed again.

"I was a first-year Hufflepuff student, under Harold Thompson's identity." he said, and looked at his former housemate. "Please forgive me?"

It took her several seconds to grasp the concept, and, when she did, she stood up with determination on her face. Three steps forward later, a resounding slap was heard in the room and Harry's cheek was decorated with a red imprint. She then threw herself at his neck, crying.

"You know, I should slap you as well." Amelia said. "She told me that she was so crushed when you left, even if your monthly missives were her rays of hope that you wouldn't forget her."

"I have never forgotten my friends, and I would never forget my first Hogwarts friends." Harry said, unsure whether the formidable woman was actually going to hit him or not.

Susan had separated a little from him, though. "Auntie!" she exclaimed indignantly, blushing at the woman's hints about her feelings for the boy.

Amelia was staring at Harry. "I won't do it, though. Not yet, anyways."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"I mean that you told us that you used Harold's identity."

Harry gazed at her appraisingly. "You truly deserve your position, Madam." he said.

Susan walked away from him when he started morphing again, his head held low. When it was finished, he looked up and she gasped, her aunt following suit. In front of them was a green-eyed boy with a scar. A very recognisable scar.

"This is my true shape. Well... almost. My real name is Harry James Potter."

Susan fainted, and Amelia had just enough reflexes to prevent her from banging her head on the floor. "Harry Potter?" she asked. "You were there all the time?"

He nodded.

"And you teach? Albus, how could you-"

Dumbledore chuckled. "He fooled me as well, Amelia. Only thanks to... certain circumstances... was I able to find the real him."

She looked at Harry shrewdly, and her eyes suddenly narrowed. "Why did you say that it was almost your true shape?"

"Because I don't have that scar anymore." he answered, and said scar disappeared. "And my eyes... Well, let's just say that there has been a problem and that I can't really show them. I don't even know what happened."

They continued to discuss, and, when Susan awoke, Harry secured the information about him in her mind, using the same technique he had done with Remus, Sirius, and the twins: by creating a subterranean vault under her consciousness building.

Amelia stayed during this, and she confirmed that his identity was protected, but that her niece's mind didn't seem protected. Harry confirmed that he couldn't teach Occlumency in five minutes, and,

after he promised to continue teaching the girl over the year, the two adults stood and took their leave.

‘Harry.’ Dumbledore mentally addressed the revealed Boy-Who-Lived. ‘Since we are allied, I think there’s a bit of information you’d like to know: it is possible for several persons to use a Time Turner. At the same time.’

Harry gaped at the departing shapes, and his Headmaster’s mental voice laughed.

‘How?’ Harry asked.

‘Simply make sure that each traveller has a body part inside its chain before turning the hourglass.’ A pause. ‘Oh, and it’s past curfew, now.’

‘Thank you. Thank you very much, sir.’ Harry sent, and Dumbledore could feel the bubble of excitement right behind the voice. He could feel, though, that Harry recognized the seriousness of the information and wasn’t going to act inconsiderately with it.

When Harry returned toward their friends, his eyes were twinkling like his Headmaster’s. He smiled, noticing that Susan was faring well with his closest friends, her congenial nature coming to the fore. At that moment, they were talking about the Animagus transformation, and Harry noticed that the Hufflepuff was clearly interested in being a part of their group.

“If you are interested, I can get you a potion to determine your animal shape, and you would work on that.” he proposed.

Tracey looked at him sharply. ‘I thought we finished the potion last time.’ she sent. ‘What do you intend to do?’

‘Well... brew another batch?’

‘But... that takes hours!’

‘You do remember I have all the time in the world, don’t you?’

‘Yes.’ she replied with a mental pout. At the same time, she leaned towards him and kissed him on the cheek, earning a stare from Susan.

“Yes, why not?” she said, and Harry nodded. He left towards his bathroom, and, a couple of Apparation trips, a return in time, and a completed brewing later, he was back with his friends.

While Harry was telling Susan how to proceed, the other four were testing their animal forms again. Raphael had proven invaluable in unlocking Ron and Ginny’s shapes, and Hermione and Tracey quickly joined them, the former as an owl and the latter as a lynx.

Since Raphael was there, the whole process went even faster for Susan, and a spaniel quickly joined the group there, Harry’s wolf shape following half a second later.

While playing with them, Harry quickly found that something wasn’t right. His friends’ instincts were enhanced due to their animal shape, and he found that the lynx and the dog were fighting for his attentions. After separating them for the third time, he addressed them mentally, telling them to turn back into their human shapes.

“What is it?” he asked Susan, but the Hufflepuff blushed and didn’t answer.

Harry didn’t push her, and he turned to Tracey and repeated the question.

“She was all over you!” the Slytherin blurted.

“Ha! I just wanted to play.” Susan retorted. “But you had to defend your territory.”

“My... what? No!”

“What is it called, then?” the Hufflepuff asked, looking smug.

“And what you did, huh? Showing him your doggy arse as though you were in heat!”

“I couldn’t prevent it! I like him!”

“I like him as well!” Tracey almost shouted.

An embarrassed cough interrupted their banter, and both of them paled, remembering that the object of their talk had been right here all along.

Harry decided to tackle the issue at once, and he raised Susan’s chin so that she looked in his eyes before addressing her. “Susan, you have been my first housemate and my first friend in Hogwarts. I won’t let you down, ever. But, as of now, I have shared more with Tracey, and she is my girlfriend, now.”

She seemed ready to burst into tears, bolt, or berate them, but she restrained herself and simply sat there, a lost expression on her face. “You know,” she started, “I used to think that Harold was too kind to me. I thought that, if he had stayed there, we could have been a little bit more than friends.” She sniffled. “Well, I was wrong.”

A pause. The other three, still in their animal shapes, looked at the exchange.

Harry glanced at Tracey, who looked back at him. Several seconds later, she nodded, and Harry addressed Susan. “Come here.” he said, extending his arms.

The Hufflepuff girl didn’t have to be told twice, and she hugged him tightly, Tracey patting her back reassuringly. A popping sound later, Ginny was standing in front of them. “Hey!”

“What?”

“I knew that Tracey was your girlfriend. Even if you kissed me, I never had a hug like that.”

Tracey turned towards Harry and stared at him. "You kissed her?"

Harry blushed. "I was... Do you remember when the twins pranked the Slytherin table? I told you about my reaction, and... it happened. It was as if I was drunk – and not my fault either."

"Hmmhmm..." Tracey said noncommittally, eyeing him for a few seconds before relenting, a wicked gleam in the eyes. "Alright. I already knew, in fact." she said, smiling as Harry sputtered. "But you are so cute when you blush."

"So?" Ginny butted in. "Do I have a hug?"

Harry looked at Tracey, then at Susan, and both girls nodded. With a squeal, the small redhead lunged into him as well, and got the hug she had asked for.

Two pops later, the last two animals reverted to their human shapes as well. "It's not fun when you are the last animal, you know." Ron said, looking at Ginny with a mock-accusing expression.

Hermione slapped his arm. "And what am I? A plant?" she demanded good-naturedly.

"You fly! I can't really play with an owl who continually evades me! Besides, it's not really why I popped back."

"Why, then?"

"Look in front of you. Don't you see it's huddle-time?"

"Huddle-time?"

"Never heard of that? We do it all the time at home, and sometimes also in Gryffindor Tower."

"Is this some kind of sex game?" she asked with an indignant expression – but the amused gleam was still present in her eyes.

“No, you pervert.” he replied, rolling his eyes. “I told you we Weasleys play at home. And as to what it is... well... let’s just say we join the group hug in front of us!”

With a shout, Ron lunged at the group in front of him, and his momentum combined with the weight of the four persons on the sofa made it tumble backwards, and everyone found themselves in a laughing tangle of limbs.

“Mischief... managed.” Ron said, winking at his sister between two bouts of laughter.

It wasn’t before ten that evening that they were ready to go to bed, and Harry Apparated them to their dorms, shocking Susan who didn’t know about all his powers yet. He first dropped Ginny and Ron in Gryffindor Tower, then Susan in the Hufflepuff cellar. After arriving in the gaseous reality of the Ravenclaw common room, Harry intended to drop Hermione before speaking with Tracey in private, but someone interfered.

Luna Lovegood entered the otherwise empty room just as Harry Apparated in. His instincts shouted him to leave, but the airy Ravenclaw was looking at them with a determined expression.

They stayed like that for several seconds before the blonde’s expression changed into a wide smile. “Oberon!” she exclaimed. “You came!”

And she lunged at Harry, who had only two alternatives: catch her, or step aside. The latter being quite rude – and not preventing a repeat – he opted for the former and found himself in a tight hug once again. “Err... I’m not Oberon, you know?”

“Of course you are!” she exclaimed indignantly. “I see you in my dreams, playing with the fairies. You are their king, you know.” She then tilted her head and looked at him with a pensive expression. Three seconds later, she jumped out of her arms, blushing. “Oh, I’m sorry. Perhaps you didn’t know, yet.”

Hermione looked like she had been gifted with two samples of Moody's magical eye, given how hers were rolling non-stop. Harry frowned, though, and decided to investigate the girl's mind to see if he could make head or tail with what she had said. Half a second after making that decision and entering her mind, he recoiled in shock and looked at her with renewed interest. "Who are you?" he asked. "And... what are you?"

"Why, it's me... Luna." she answered, suddenly shy and nervous. "You didn't recognize me?"

Harry continued to stare at the living mystery in front of him, before sighing. "Yes, Luna. I recognize you. And I'm sure that, from now on, I would recognize you through any kind of disguise."

"Thank you, Obe." she said, and hugged him again.

"I'm not... oh, never mind." Harry replied.

'Harry?' 'What was that about?' came from the two other persons in the room.

'Her mind.' he sent back. 'It's... peculiar.'

'No surprise here.' Hermione answered, before blushing slightly when he frowned at her. 'What? It's true! The other Ravenclaws even call her Loony.'

'Still, she was Sorted in Ravenclaw, which in itself should be enough to prove that she can be as studious as the rest of you.'

'Well, we haven't seen that side of hers yet.' she stated.

Another mental voice interrupted their banter. 'Perhaps it's because your friends keep stealing my stuff.'

Harry looked around, startled. That hadn't been Tracey's mental voice! In fact, it resembled the voice of... the person snuggled in his arms!

“Luna?” he asked.

“What? Sorry, I was busy listening to the fairies.” she said, and the three others noticed an unusual gleam in her eyes.

“I can’t believe it... She pulled a joke.” Hermione breathed.

It took several seconds for them to grasp the fact that Luna was in fact very gifted magically, and they realized that she could be an authentic Seer – only lacking the proper education in that field. Harry decided to take her under his wing, and, when he told them that, Luna squealed, and kissed him on his cheeks before darting to her dorm.

“Well... that went well.” Tracey deadpanned, before frowning at Harry. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you are a womaniser, Harry Potter.”

The addressed teen blushed slightly. “I’m not! And she’s not even old enough for... for...”

“And we are?” she asked, fists on her hips.

Harry started to recoil, but he noticed the amused gleam in her eyes, and stopped. All three of them burst into laughter, before separating, Hermione going to her dorm and Harry Apparating with Tracey to her Slytherin room.

Still in the gaseous reality, he turned towards her. “Are you alright with it?”

“Alright with what? The girls?” she asked, and he nodded. “Well, I can’t prevent you from being Harry Potter and impressing the bajeesus out of everyone you meet. And that’s not counting your powers.”

He shivered. “Still... I’m not going into Luna’s mind anytime soon.”

Tracey looked at him inquiringly. "What about it? Is she an Occlumens?"

"Not really, no. It's just that... it's really a mess, there. Instead of staying on the ground, all her memories are moving around in the air. And quickly, too! I was almost hit with three of them in the short time I spent there."

"You think it's the reason behind her... personality?" she asked.

Harry shrugged. "I can only suppose."

After a pensive stretch of several seconds, Tracey yawned widely. Harry chuckled, earning himself a slap on the arm. "It is way past curfew, you know?" she asked.

"Alright, alright. I'll see you tomorrow." he said, and leaned forwards.

She did as well, and they shared a short kiss. The two of them had started to do so only recently, and it stayed chaste, not involving any physical and intimate relationship yet.

The following day was a Friday, and Harry decided to pay a little visit to Hagrid, who happened to have an empty period before lunch. It was mainly out of politeness and because Hagrid had told him to, less than a month ago. However, Harry had a conversation topic ready: he wanted to know what had happened to the Hippogriffs Hagrid had shown his class that first week, especially the one called Buckbeak – after all, he didn't know if Malfoy had reported his incident with the creature. Hagrid answered readily, though, reassuring him that they had safely returned to their natural habitat in the Forbidden Forest. After this, the two of them exchanged a bit more small talk before he took his leave.

Like the previous day, the fighting club meeting of the evening started by an unusual event: apparently, a few Gryffindor students thought that they had "measured" their teacher's skill and thought themselves above it. Their leader, a seventh year named Matthew Campbell, had brashly asked for a chance at Harry's challenge, and he had chosen

the all-out duel – meaning that curses, weapons, and unarmed fighting were allowed.

So, instead of several duelling platform scattered across the room, the entering members of the small club noticed the only platform in the middle of the room. It was a large one, made of a raised circle of twenty feet in diameter. Two smaller circles half that size were on either side of the large one, and a pathway went from them to the central one.

As the members settled on the chairs that were provided, they were quickly joined by numerous students and several members of the staff, the latter conjuring more chairs for the former and themselves. Apparently, the news of the duel had reached the whole school, and Harry had to enlarge the room for it to contain the unusually large crowd – as today's club was usually restricted to members of three others, its normal attendance was quite small, barely reaching thirty; and that was including Harry's friends.

His competitor arrived, a group of supporters behind him, and Harry eyed him critically. Michael Campbell was a typical Gryffindor, brave and headstrong, and there had been no doubt in Harry's mind that he would have a student from that house as his first opponent in his challenge. Stereotypically, Ravenclaws and Slytherins would collect data from this encounter – the former for research and the latter to try to get an advantage on future fights –, and Hufflepuffs wouldn't dare attacking him.

“Welcome to the all-out duelling club.” he announced. “Today, we have the luck of witnessing a duel in which my honourable opponent will try his chance at the challenge I issued a month ago. Whatever the issue, let's applaud him for being the first to do so!” he said and clapped at the young man. Michael blushed slightly, but recovered his focus quickly, and Harry quirked his brows, silently wondering if the boy had been home-schooled in fighting before.

“Michael had expressed the desire for this duel to be an all-out one, which is why we scheduled it for today. It means that unarmed attacks, swords, and magic will be acceptable. We have also decided

that, despite that platform's beautiful look, falling off it won't count. We will both stay inside a larger circle, though, which will be shielded by our illustrious Headmaster so that no harm will befall our dear spectators." A pause. "I hope the members of the club take notes of what will happen, and I also hope that we can push prospective members to join. Staff members, that's also for you." he said, smiling.

After a short pause, he continued. "As discussed beforehand, this duel will be judged with a panel comprised of Albus Dumbledore, Minerva McGonagall, and Nicholas Flamel." He nodded at the three of them. "Our school nurse is here too, in case Mr Campbell dismembers me – which I hope he won't." Several spectators chuckled and Michael smiled weakly. "This duel will, in fact, continue until one yields or is rendered unable to attack and defend – being unconscious or paralysed. A rematch is possible if both fighters agree to do so after the first match. If a tie is then reached, a third match will decide the winner." He finished, before turning to his opponent. "Ready?"

The other boy – who was four years older than him! – was nervous, but he acquiesced nonetheless. While Michael readied his claymore in his right hand and his wand in his left, Harry went to his starting circle and did the same with a dagger and his willow wand. Both blades had been blunted by the appropriate spells, and they would only mark the place they touched in red.

They then waited for Dumbledore's word.

"Begin!"

"Protego!" Michael shouted, aiming his wand at himself before approaching the centre ring slowly, shouting Stunning and Disarming spells at Harry.

Harry raised an eyebrow and, using the same shield, he blocked all the incoming spells easily. Knowing that the boy wanted an all-out confrontation, he also walked towards the central ring. However, as a reminder that magic wasn't all, he threw his dagger at his opponent, and it made a red scratch on Michael's left leg.

It surprised the boy, but the fact that his magical shield wasn't protecting from physical attacks was quickly assimilated and he also took advantage of Harry's unarmed state to lunge at him with his sword. Harry merely Summoned his dagger and parried his attack with a resounding clang that echoed in the large room.

They stayed like this for a few seconds before Michael jumped back and nodded. He then alternated between attacking with his blade, which Harry managed to parry all the time, and retreating and attacking with spells. Harry was only defending, using his left-handed dagger to parry the sword and a magical shield to block the spells. His opponent had a sudden idea, though, one that Harry didn't catch – he had locked his Legilimency powers for the duration of the fight, judging that it was too much of cheating for the fight to stay fair.

Michael cast a few explosion curses at Harry, and the last one he voluntarily aimed lower, targeting the ground in front of Harry. The resulting explosion damaged the platform and sent debris flying towards Harry... who barely managed to cast the physical shield in time.

The action caused several onlookers to gasp, and Harry smiled. 'This one has guts, instinct, and intelligence.' he thought analytically, before returning his focus to the battle at hand. He decided to test the boy's defences, now, and started casting mild-powered spells towards him. He noticed that the boy had to renew his shield several times, and that it took his concentration off the physical side of the battle.

Harry then decided to bring it to an end, several people having noticed the exhibition nature of the fight already. He lunged – not too quickly, but fast enough to startle Michael – and started attacking with the dagger and casting spells at point blank range.

Eventually, Michael's shield collapsed and he was too occupied defending against the dagger to notice and recast it. Harry Disarmed him and took advantage of the boy's shock to Stun him – as said earlier, merely losing one's weapons was not a sign of defeat.

Harry was pronounced winner, and he awoke his opponent gently. Michael was quite red at having lost, even if he knew that the teacher was good, and he asked for a rematch. After they magically repaired the platform, Dumbledore announced the start of the fight, and Michael threw three Disarming spells on Harry before protecting himself against magical attacks. As they were quite far from each other, Harry had enough time to erect a reflecting shield, and two of the three curses were sent back to their owner, who had to dodge them. The third was reflected at an odd angle when Harry started to move, and it struck Dumbledore's shield harmlessly. Harry had decided to use unarmed fighting for this round, and he ran towards his opponent, stowing the dagger into his belt and his wand in his wrist holster. The few spells that came to him were either reflected or he sidestepped them.

Michael had enough of a job dodging his own curses, and he was thoroughly surprised when he noticed Harry right in front of him, apparently unarmed. He tried to swing his sword at him, but Harry blocked the move by grabbing his sword arm, and he struck the nerve points in the boy's neck, making him unconscious even more quickly than the first round.

Dumbledore pronounced Harry winner again, and Harry awakened Michael again.

"I have to congratulate you. You were the first to try, and you put up quite a fight, there." he told him.

"But you were better." the young man said, almost sulking.

"Listen to me." Harry said, looking at him in the eye. "There is always someone better than us, out there. To my eyes, you were good, and I will commend you for an entrance in the Auror Academy, if you so choose."

The boy blushed and muttered his thanks, before joining his posse under the applause from everyone.

“Show’s over, now. Thank you all for coming.” Harry said, addressing the crowd. “Members of today’s club, you stay. We will speak about the duel.”

To his surprise, when the mere spectators had left, there were still several students there who didn’t belong to the club. As well as some professors like Flitwick, Dumbledore, and Flamel.

“How interesting!” Flitwick was practically jumping on his feet. “I always thought that duelling clubs were interesting, but... mixing other attack styles can be very surprising. I heard that it wasn’t really an exhibition match?”

“No. I challenged my students, and, so far, only Michael answered it. Since the Gryffindor House had had a go at me, I expect more tries from other Houses, now.”

“Are teachers included in that challenge?” Flitwick asked.

Harry noticed the interested expression from Dumbledore and Flamel, and he sighed. “Not in that context, I’m sorry. But we can schedule real exhibition duels, if you so choose.”

“I’d be delighted, and, if you don’t mind, I’d like to come to your clubs on a permanent basis, starting with this one.”

The crowd around them voiced their agreement, and Harry reflected that, if he wanted more students in the last club, he had to bring more in the intermediate clubs as well. He had also realized that some students were already talented in some techniques – he had compiled lists of students attending and their skill, by now. A few of them were even arrogant about it, and Harry had thought that a lesson could be taught if they were forced to join other groups. A lesson in humility.

In the course of the following weeks, students would find themselves with more and more pins on their fighting club badge. And their level in these clubs would rise as well, to the point of, nearing the end of

the school year, Harry would need more types of precious metal to design the pins.

That evening, after dinner, Harry discussed about the Patronus charm with his friends, and, prodded by their enthusiasm, he demonstrated it, using his Kentaro persona as a base. Raphael was there too, and, his eyes twinkling in a Dumbledorish way, he suggested that he morphed into a sabre-toothed tiger as well. Soon, the two overly large felines were playing with each other.

“How is that possible?” Hermione asked when Harry was Harry again and the Patronus was dispelled – or rather "reintegrated" as Raphael said. “What is it made of? How many can you cast? Did you-hmmph!”

“Thank you.” Harry told Ron, who had slapped his hand on Hermione’s mouth in an attempt to silence her. The two boys shared a mock look of long suffering before breaking into grins. After letting Hermione simmer for a couple seconds, Harry turned towards her. “Raphael told me it’s magic.” He noticed the numerous raised eyebrows. “It is made of magic. My magic, to be precise. As to how to cast it, I will gladly teach you, but not this evening.”

“It was solid.” Ginny breathed, remembering the soft and tingly alabaster-coloured fur.

“Usually, you link one good memory to the charm.” Harry explained. “I decided to connect several to see what would happen. It happens that it reinforces the thing impressively.”

“I wouldn’t have wanted to be a Dementor right then.” Ron said. “Or anything else you throw that mountain of muscles on, either.”

“It doesn’t-” Harry started.

“I know.” Ron interrupted. “Not really muscles. Mountain of magic muscles, then. Still, its claws seemed able to pass through anything.”

"They are." Harry confirmed, having tested them against almost everything he could think of. Needless to say, Flamel had been impressed. "You're progressing, young man." he had said, and Harry had been shocked to see that it was true, as the compared power of the old man had "dropped" to 10 times his own. The Alchemist had then given him series of exercises to do with the Patronus. "Magic is like a muscle." he had said. "And getting your Patronus in and out repeatedly will strengthen yours even more."

Hermione said something that distracted Harry from his flashback.

"I'm sorry, you said?" he asked.

She rolled her eyes but repeated her question. "Since you can send magic out of your body, can you shape it at will?"

"Well, with trial and error, I can find another animal, but-

"I was thinking about items." she amended. "Weapons."

"Oh. Oh!" A pause. "I haven't tried." he admitted. "It's hard enough to get the animal you want, and I haven't thought of inanimate objects yet." Internally, Harry made a note to ask Flamel about that.

Weapons made of pure magic... that would be awesome.
The next day...

The day was Saturday, and Harry was taking advantage of a free day to Apparate to Egypt with Raphael. Using Bill's indications, they arrived next to a small village and started to search for an old temple in the local ruins.

It took them several hours to reach... nothing but a conclusion.

"It should be here!" Harry exclaimed after exiting the ruin for the umpteenth time. "All the pointers he gave end here!" His temper flaring, he kicked a loose stone. The chunk of stone flew several yards before stopping.

“Calm yourself.” Raphael said, letting the stone fall on the ground gently. “There’s no need to show violence.”

“Yet.” Harry finished darkly.

“Are you sure of the indications and of how you followed them?”

“Yes! They were crystal clear! It should be under that ruin, but the corridor he hints at is missing! As though...” Harry trailed off, his gaze far away.

“As though?” queried Raphael – archangels had numerous powers, but they weren’t omniscient.

“As though it was hidden.” Harry breathed. “The Fidelius. How could I have forgotten about it?” He kicked another stone, but more dejectedly than angrily, and Raphael let the offending piece of masonry roll softly. “You didn’t see anything?” he asked suddenly.

“Despite being able to see things hidden by mere mortals, I did not see anything.” Raphael confirmed, and Harry sighed.

“It must have been Voldemort’s job, then. How are we going to...” His eyes lit up. “We could level the whole place, and then his hideout would be the last thing standing. He might as well die in the cave-in. We...”

“We can’t do that.” Raphael intervened, earning himself an accusing glance from the teen. He shrugged. “As I understand it, the spell you mentioned hides things quite thoroughly. Not only from the mind, but from physical means as well. No muggle succeeded in constructing things where such a ward was erected.”

Harry was pensive. “Do you think that’s why there are so many empty lots in towns?” he asked, and shook his head to clear it from the foreign thought. “Alright. No wide-scale demolition, then.” A long pause, while he looked around. “I think we should head back and think about it elsewhere. As I recall from how the spell works, they could have seen us.”

Raphael nodded, and the two of them left the place, one after the other. Seconds before disappearing, though, Raphael looked around, and his face grew stern. "I got you once." he muttered. "I will again." Not that far away...

There were five persons in the room. Although none of them really deserved the title "person" since there were mostly demons, and Voldemort was a hybrid of a powerful wizard and a snake. Snape was the most "human" of the lot, despite his strange eyes and his feeble constitution.

"I brought you here to discuss about an assessment of your abilities." Voldemort started, his gaze encompassing the small room and resting on Malfoy last. "Last time, the test took place in a calm environment, and some... entity found about it. I took the liberty of exploring the surrounding for a place with unrest so that you won't be noticed that much." A pause. "That's also why no other follower is here, since some of them could have babbled things that eventually landed in the ears of the old muggle-loving fool."

"Do not worry." Malfoy said. "If our opponent shows himself again, we will get him quickly." he finished with a smirk, before looking towards the two other demons, who acquiesced – although Bellatrix's nod was more agitated and less solemn than Derrick's.

"Will you be able to participate?" Voldemort asked Snape, who merely raised an eyebrow. Once again, thinking about how the demons usually took over their host's body, Voldemort was surprised to see the man react... like Snape.

"I am not fully healed yet." Snape wheezed. "I don't want-" A cough. "I mean... bar a couple of spells, I won't be able to do much."

"That will be enough." the Dark Lord replied, smiling like serpents did. He then opened a small box and gave them rings. "These rings are charmed with a timed portkey to bring you next to the city where

the battle will take place, and another one to take you back when you say "Mission accomplished". I think that, given the city's layout, we can compare the test to a chess game, and, if you agree, I will team you likewise: Lucius and Bellatrix on the attack; Ursinus and Severus on the defence." A pause. "Of course, I don't ask you to defend the people there."

They all chuckled – except Snape, who was caught by a coughing fit – and agreed to the terms.

"Good!" Voldemort exclaimed. "The rings will activate in an hour, approximately. I expect you to take your position, and start the game itself by tomorrow. In the meantime, we can discuss about anything you want. Are your quarters satisfactory?"

"You don't need to ask, Lord Voldemort." Derrick said. "If they weren't, we would change them ourselves. We appreciate your efforts to show the respect due to us, though, even if, as our Summoner, you-"

He was interrupted by a coughing fit from Snape, who raised his hands afterwards. "Sorry."

"You haven't done something for your eye." Bellatrix remarked dismissively, and, once again, Voldemort was struck by how close in personality the Summoned demons were to their hosts. His thoughts started to head towards Bill Weasley's fate, but the Succubus' question had raised his anger. He loathed being exposed, and that particular wound, on top of proving his vulnerability, added to it.

Before he could lash out, though, the seductress made another comment that stopped him. "You could do something, you know? I could pluck an eye from one of your followers and graft it in its place."

"You could re-grow it." Malfoy said. "Of course, it would be painful, but..."

A pause.

“I retained some of my host’s memories.” Snape said. “And I remember an old Auror with a charmed eye.”

“I won’t have prostheses!” Voldemort exclaimed, and he looked at Bellatrix intently. “Tell me more.”

She twirled her hair in her usual airy manner. “I will have to take that human’s life force and infuse it in its eye, and then I put it in your socket, and voilà.”

Voldemort smiled, but Derrick butted in, addressing her. “Complete that statement.”

She shrugged and spoke again. “I will have to take that male’s life force through sex. And, while that magic binds itself to your skull, it will be painful as well.”

“Lord Voldemort, if I may suggest...” Malfoy started, and continued when he had the Dark Lord’s full attention. “What Severus said was interesting for several reasons. I also have memories of my host interacting with that Moody person and Dumbledore’s clique. Such an eye can be charmed, giving you the ability to see through walls, for instance. And you can add other charms as well.”

“Such as? What kind of charm can be done on an artificial eye except vision enhancement?”

“I have never been to an optometrist, so I wouldn’t know.” the man answered. “I was merely thinking of general spells. Like a portkey.”

Voldemort kept silent for a couple minutes, pondering the recent conversation and weighing his options. “I shall see.” he said, and grinned at his involuntary pun. “I shall see.” he added more forcefully.

Several seconds later, Malfoy spoke again. “There is also the fate of our spy in Hogwarts to consider.”

“We will see to that later.” the Dark Lord answered. “There is not much time to discuss this topic right now. And you know we can’t

place an efficient spy without a good deal of research beforehand. If we put the Imperius on his staff, the old fool would sense it miles away." A pause. "In fact, if you have nothing else to add, I'll adjourn this meeting."

The demons – and Snape – nodded and left. They had barely left the room when Voldemort called for one of his faithful followers.

"Jugson!"

A short time later, the addressed Death Eater appeared in front of him. "My Lord required me?"

"I have an errand for you to make, Jugson. Not a word to anyone about it, though!"

"As you wish, my Lord. I wouldn't dare-"

"Alright, alright. I need you to fetch information about a magical eye."

A short pause.

"A magical eye, my Lord?" Jugson asked.

"You heard me. Go to a magical optometrist and see what options can be added to one. You report to me, and me only. Now go."

When Jugson scurried away, Voldemort looked away, an indecipherable expression on his face. With all the rituals he had undergone, Voldemort had thought himself free of the trials of the common man, and he loathed being vulnerable. And suffering from pain was something he abhorred – that's why he had taken such a keen interest in the Cruciatus Curse, as it reminded him that he was the one dealing pain to others, and not the other way around. Hogwarts Great Hall, the next day, at lunchtime...

Harry was discussing with Flitwick about the Patronus Charm, when someone patted his shoulder. He jumped and turned around, his wand in his hand already.

“Calm down, son.”

It was Flamel. Harry blinked, as he distinctly remembered his master telling him he'd be off for the week-end to see Merlin. Since he was back early... 'Again?' he mentally asked, and Flamel nodded.

Harry excused himself quickly, and followed the old man through the side door. He was aware that several persons would notice, but there was no quick and inconspicuous way to leave the Great Hall. What he wasn't aware of, though, was a spell that was uttered discreetly by the Headmaster.

Of course, his friends noticed his departure.

‘Harry?’ it was Tracey’s mental voice. ‘What is it?’

‘I’m off to fight. Again.’ he answered grimly, but conveying his feelings of love to her.

‘Where?’ she sent, sounding resigned but sending her love as well.

‘I don’t know yet. I’ll tell you on the way.’

“Well?” he asked Flamel after having Apparated the two of them into his quarters.

“Take the location from my mind, and then you can prepare yourself and go one hour back in time again.”

“No.” a third voice said, and Harry jumped and whirled for the second time in the last five minutes.

He relaxed when he noticed who it was, though. “Why no?” he asked Raphael.

“Archangels and archdemons have a very... strong influence over time. Using one Time Turner next to me won’t work. Using one next to Asmodai would be highly dangerous. And you need me there with you, so we’ll leave as soon as you’re ready.”

Harry shuddered, but he concentrated, and started to quickly repeat the steps of preparation for his forthcoming fight. “Asmodai?” he asked while he was extending his additional arms.

“The archdemon your enemy had managed to acquire the services of.” Raphael answered, his voice uncharacteristically tense.

Harry paused for a split second to remark the look on Raphael’s face. Resuming his actions, he asked “Anything I should be aware of?”

“I imprisoned him, eons ago.” Raphael answered. “He and I... fought. A pitched battle. I got him because I know his weak point.”

“And it is?”

“Water. He hates water. All kinds of water.”

A pause.

“Good.” Harry smirked. “I shall spit on him, then.”

Raphael snorted, and the two humans looked at him in shock. “That’s what I did.” he admitted. “It was in the heat of-” he stopped suddenly and seemed to notice Harry gawking at him. “We don’t have time for this!”

While Harry hurried through his preparations, Raphael approached Flamel. “Do you intend to warn the Headmaster and his Order?”

The addressed man looked at the wise and old eyes in front of him. Few eyes containing more wisdom and years than his own, and Raphael’s were: the archangels had been created before mankind walked Earth. The compassion Flamel also saw in these eyes

brought him to a conclusion. "I will." he said simply, and both of them nodded.

Harry took the memory from Flamel's mind and relayed it to Tracey hurriedly. He then hurled himself through space again, followed by Raphael, while the old Alchemist headed towards the door.

He didn't have to open it, though, as a stern-looking Headmaster barged in, followed by an equally severe Deputy Headmistress. They entered and closed the door behind them, the move allowing Flamel to notice the teenagers behind.

"Where is he?" Dumbledore asked when the door was safely closed.

The alchemy teacher smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "I was warned of an attack by the demons." he said. "Harry left already, with Raphael."

"You know Harry? And Raphael?" McGonagall asked, dumbfounded.

"Of course I do. With Harry my Apprentice and all..."

"Your apprentice?" Dumbledore asked, equally dumbfounded.

"We don't have time for mind games." Flamel said. "I have been told to give you and your Order the location of the attack."

"Good! We can help him, then." McGonagall stated, and Flamel muttered something that only Dumbledore seemed to catch. "What was it?"

"Clean-up job." the older of the two old men repeated.

Dumbledore was pensive, but a frown from his mentor reminded him of what was at stake. He fingered his phoenix ring in a certain way and proceeded out, McGonagall on his heels. Flamel followed at a more sedate pace, knowing that it would take some time for the Order to congregate. Outside Harry's quarters, he looked around and

noticed that the teenagers who had been there weren't anymore. He smirked.

"I think the best place to get further information is near the Headmaster's office." he addressed the seemingly empty corridor, and, sure enough, a few gasps could be heard from a couple alcoves. The old Alchemist knew that there were more than a couple students there, and silently admired the self-control of the others. He then took off and followed Dumbledore's tracks.

It took a ridiculous amount of time to get everybody, and they were looking at Flamel nervously.

"I'm here to tell you about a battle." he said, keeping Harry's name silent. "It's located in..."
Mogadishu, Somalia...

When he arrived in sight of the coastal city, Harry smirked. "There's water, shall we need some." he said, and headed there, fishing one of his Unbreakable bottles out. After a bit of enlarging and reducing charms and a dunk, he found himself with a small vial containing the equivalent of a swimming pool.

His smirk vanished, though, when he heard the noise of automatic weapons being fired in the streets nearby. As he didn't know who was fighting who, he decided to play safe and only disable the armed forces. Using his ring, he focused properly and threw a physical shield up, followed by disillusionment and notice-me-not charms.

He then Apparated in and started to throw spell after spell, protected by Raphael. He thus spent a couple hours Stunning, Petrifying, and generally disabling people gently, or Summoning and Vanishing their weapons.

In one instance, he noticed numerous members of the local militia hammering a particular group of soldiers near a crashed helicopter. In one carefully applied Summoning charm, he grouped the hundred of

weapons there into a nice stack, and was ready to Vanish them when he felt the hair stand on end at the base of his neck.

“Well, well, well...” a deep voice said. “I wasn’t sure, but now I am. How are you doing, Raphael?” it asked, coldness belying the politeness.

“Very well, thank you.” the addressed archangel replied, equally polite and cold. “What about you, Asmodai?”

“I’m great!” A smile, that turned sneer. “But I have years to take revenge for.”

The archdemon made a strange gesture: he knelt and his hand plunged in the soil. A mere second later, he was drawing a sword from the earth. It was dark, almost black, and as long as a human was tall. Its blade had flame running around it, highlighting ominous runes etched along its length.

“You shouldn’t have done that. You now know the limit.” Raphael said, and he put his own hand in the air. In the same way the demonic fiend had extracted his flaming blade from the earth, the celestial being got his own from the sky. But it wasn’t flaming. It was a delicate sword which seemed made of ice, but Harry instinctively knew it was as solid as the other one. No rune marred its perfect shape, and Raphael swished it expertly right and left.

Harry knew it was Raphael’s fight. He also knew that other demons must be running loose during this, but he couldn’t move from the scene. Partly because it was truly a sight to behold, and partly because an annoying little voice in his head told him to... put his hand in his pocket?

He frowned, and put his hand in his pocket. And found the vial. Of course!

Once again, he Apparated out, and hovered atop the archdemon. Way atop it, as he didn’t want to be sliced in half by swords that

seemed to exist in the gaseous reality as well. As silently as possible, he held the bottle in his hand, and Vanished it.

Of course, a properly focused Vanishing spell can make only one item disappear, and, the container gone, thousands of galleons of sea water fell on the archfiend.

“What the...?” he spluttered, and Harry smiled.

It was not a long-lived smile, though, as he noticed Asmodai’s eyes change colour. In the gaseous reality.

‘Uh oh.’ he thought.

And it was his last coherent thought, as he felt himself drawn to these eyes. He felt... completely the opposite of his bath with Raphael: back then, it had been comfort, and nothing arose from the situation; here, it was plain lust, and, despite his Occlumency shield, he was still connected to his hormones and wanted to be submissive to the demon. He wanted...

“Harry!”

A voice. A call. But he didn’t want it. He wanted the pretty eyes.

Blades swinging near him. Parrying. Swishing. Pain.

“Harry!”

The cry was desperate, this time, and there was something about his leg which brought him back to reality. It wasn’t pain, because he had disconnected his body’s pain from his mind before the fight. It was more an information on his physical status. And the wound he now felt there had had some drastic effect on his hormones. Enough so that he could think. After firmly vowing to do something about it later, his mind returned to his current predicament. He was in the middle of a fight between two powerful beings, and his right ankle had been slashed – by the demon’s sword, judging by the burnt clothes. Now that his mind was his own again, he was able to evade the next swing

which would have cut his head – although it was only barely, and he could hear the runes scream in frustration.

Back behind Raphael, he sat down, panting at the near-death experience. He instinctively knew that, should he die from the demon's blade, his soul would be sent to hell right away. Looking down, he also knew that he had to act fast if he didn't want to die from the festering wound on his leg. His whole calf was already swollen and grey.

That kind of surgery was generally painful. Very much so. But Harry didn't feel pain at the moment, and, besides, he didn't have much choice. At least, he had the luck of being quite proficient in limb-reconstruction jobs. He aimed his ring carefully. "Diffindo. Incendio."

And his right leg was nothing more than a pile of ash. Now, his most urgent job was to heal the bleeding stump. He looked around, and at the sword fight in front of him. If he had to be far for this, far he would be. He Apparated out and shot up in the sky.

Bad choice.

He had never before shot straight up. In less time that it takes to say it, he was already out of the atmosphere, careening in a low-altitude gaseous satellite. Thankfully, he didn't have to breathe in the gaseous reality or he'd be dead. Same went for the extreme temperatures or the void. There was something unusual, though. Something unusual for the usually still gaseous reality.

There was wind.

And Harry re-discovered something that had been found in the 1950s and later extended to include the neutrinos – his current state. That wind came from the sun. He suddenly remembered Genevieve telling him about her plans for neutrino traps and why there would be neutrinos travelling in space at all. Actually, neutrinos were particles that had very few interactions with others – which was why his state of "coherent bunch of neutrinos" was incomprehensible – and stars were generating them in their superheated centres. When they were

expelled outwards, they didn't interact with the outer layers of the star and formed a steady wind.

Harry smiled as an idea came into his mind: he briefly considering putting an anti-Apparation ward right where he was so as to navigate the wind, but shot the idea immediately, realizing that he'd be blown away. Besides, there was no water to dwell in, and no gravity to call his body downwards. There was only wind.

Harry "returned to the present" and turned the Time-Turned one hour into the past. Then, after going down to a manageable altitude, he took most of that hour to re-grow his leg. When came the time for his past self to shoot upwards, he hid around the battlefield and took his own place immediately afterwards, focusing on the battle in front of him and arming himself at the same time.

"What... about the... water?" Raphael was asking, panting from the exhaustion.

Asmodai looked a bit healthier than him and smirked. "When you spend so much... time in a prison of water... you grow used to it."

The demon was clearly having a distinct advantage there, and it even succeeded in disarming Raphael, sending the ice sword clattering on the ground. As Asmodai was aiming his flaming sword at the archangel's throat, Harry then decided to do something. Something foolish, but he had already done worse.

"Hey! Asshole-modai!" he shouted, grabbing the demon attention away from Raphael. "Stupefy! Petrificatus Totalus! Diffindo! Reducto! Expelliarmus! Incarcerous! Serpensortia! Avis! Oppugno!"

For each spell he threw using Merlin's wand, he also pulled the trigger of three crossbows at the same time, sending acid-filled, incendiary, and exploding bolts towards the otherworldly being. And he immediately understood that he wasn't going to be able to finish it that way, if at all. His spells and bolts were all bouncing off the fiend's impervious hide. The only thing able to do a difference was the acid: it sizzled on the demon's skin and made welts there. Despite the fact

that these welts were quickly healing, hitting them with the spells and other bolts seemed to be a little more efficient than otherwise. Harry continued to shoot at the archdemon, aiming for the open wounds.

He knew he couldn't kill him and that the demon might retaliate before being seriously hurt. However, he had noticed that, behind Asmodai's back, Raphael had recovered his sword and was readying it for a deadly blow. None of them was prepared for him to send his hellish sword straight at Harry, though.

There are times where time seems to slow and then you act. Other times, it only seems to slow, period. These are times when you see death hurrying towards you. Such was a time.

Harry knew he couldn't Apparate out because the sword would catch him in the gaseous reality as well. He closed his eyes, readying himself for an eternity of pain, when he heard a clashing sound, followed by a clatter. Half a second later, an inhumane yell of pain resounded.

When Harry opened his eyes, he saw Raphael in front of Asmodai. The archangel was smiling grimly, the dark sword was on the ground nearby, and the celestial sword had made a gash on the demon's torso.

"It's not finished, Raphael!" Asmodai bellowed, holding his wounded chest. "You hear me? It's not done yet!" And he disappeared in a burst of red flames. Harry tensed, looking around in case the fiend had Apparated behind him or such trap, but Raphael put a calming hand on his shoulder.

"He's gone, Harry. He won't come back for a while."

"I'm sorry, Raphael. I thought... it's because of me that you let him live."

"Harry!" Raphael looked at him sternly. "Angels and demons do not live or die. They just are. And, concerning Asmodai, remember that we both are linked to persons by the Summoning potion our hosts

imbibed. Remember that I'm here to help you." A pensive frown. "I think the association of your weapons and the swordfight got to him at last. He won't even think of coming back; he needs to lick his wounds, now." A faint and tired smile. "As I should."

"What? Why..."

"I am wounded, after all. I made a mistake in thinking Asmodai still had that one weak point. He took advantage of this and wounded me. I need time to heal, as does he. " A short pause. "But don't worry about your friend William. He will be back in no time. We will meet again, but I'm forced to leave you with the others."

"The others?"

"The other demons." Raphael breathed, and he started to shimmer out. "Listen, Harry, and listen well, because you have to remember something. With magic, you can get as much as you give."

"What?"

But Raphael was already gone.

Harry looked around, but there was almost no trace of the fight. The swords were gone, as were the swordsmen.

In the eerie calm, though, Harry heard the characteristic chopping sound of an approaching helicopter, and he started to disillusion himself, but a glance at the pile of weapons in the middle of the street told him that it wouldn't be sufficient. There were automatic firearms but there were also two rocket-propelled grenade launchers, and he knew, by looking at these, that a disillusionment charm wouldn't shield him against that – and the chopper wouldn't be protected either.

He still didn't know who was fighting who, and didn't want to take unnecessary risks. Still using Merlin's wand, he reapplied the physical protection charm – which had been ripped through by Asmodai's sword.

His worry about the helicopter was short-lived as the noise diminished, the aircraft leaving the premises. There were still guerrilla-like sounds around the place, and Harry started moving in the direction of the loudest one, crossing military convoys on the way. Each time, he made a cursory glance at their memories, but didn't find anything unusual in there: they were all obeying orders. He now knew, however, the forces in presence. Acting as city defenders were the Somali militia, and the American were there to solve a fucked-up hostage crisis – one where they had tried to take hostages.

Starting to understand the situation, Harry knew that wizards were behind the unrest. Demons, even. After all, no sane person would have thrown a lit match in the powder keg that was the city the previous weeks.

He was thinking about this when he stumbled on a yard in which a lone wizard was sitting. He seemed to sleep, but Harry knew better than assume that from a potential enemy. Especially as... that particular wizard had a staff lying next to him!

Suddenly, several popping sounds could be heard and a group of wizards and witches appeared out of nowhere. They were quite disoriented as well, and Harry quickly understood why: these were the members of the Order of the Phoenix, led by Dumbledore and arriving by portkey.

His eyes catching a move, Harry looked back to the lone wizard and found him standing. The man was leaning heavily on his staff, but he was staring at the arrivals fiercely. Harry stifled a gasp when he recognized Snape's features and the changes that had been brought by the foreign spirit. Time seemed to slow again as Snape moved his arms in a strange pattern and uttered foreign sounds – even to Harry's ears.

A globe shimmered around Snape, but he wasn't done incanting, and Harry felt something with his peripheral Legilimency. It was very faint, but it was also extremely dangerous. It reeked of charred flesh, in fact...

“DUCK!” he yelled, transfiguring a bench into a sturdy wall just as the second spell started its course.

The thin ray of light found the transfigured wall instead of his designated target, and it exploded into an enormous fireball. Some Order members got their pointy hats blown off their heads by the explosion. The wall itself hadn’t survived, but Harry knew he could make it again. He was grimly satisfied, though, because the explosion had encompassed the lone wizard, and there was no way he could have survived... was there?

He suddenly heard the same foreign language, and noticed the wizard, still there and perfectly healthy, his sphere of protection solidly in place. And he was looking straight at him.

Harry swore and tried to do something to counteract the magic at work. He couldn’t do much, though, as a resounding headache started in his head, going worse by the second. He fell on his knees, his four hands dropping their content on the ground and holding his head.

Meanwhile, the Order members had regained their wits and threw spells in earnest, but none passed the shimmering barrier, and Snape seemed to be focused on bringing harm to Harry – although the man was showing signs of tiredness.

It was Alastor Moody who found an interesting solution. He grabbed one of Harry’s crossbows and fired at the man.

At the same time, Harry started to bellow. “GET... OUT... OF... MY... HEAD!”

Snape took a step back and looked surprised – resisting his Charm spell wasn’t a common occurrence among humans. The second surprise came from the bolt from Moody. The bolt itself crashed against another invisible barrier, but, as luck would have it, Moody had picked the best crossbow for the job. The bolt’s content continued its course, and acid splashed the wizard’s left sleeve.

Snape looked at his sizzling skin as if it was an interesting project, but he promptly disappeared before Moody could try another shot.

“Portkey?” the retired Auror asked to Dumbledore.

“I don’t know.” the older man said, shaking his head. “Mustn’t be Apparation, though, because of the ward I just put up.” He looked around. “Order! Report!”

“No casualty.” McGonagall said, before turning towards Harry. “A good example of defensive transfiguration. Thank you.”

Dumbledore nodded absently, looking at the one unknown quantity in front of them. There weren’t many choices at the man’s identity, but his appearance was quite... fearsome.

“Ha-” he started, but Harry’s alabaster face turned towards him, and he remembered that not all of the order members remembered. “Good evening.” he amended. “Thank you for defending us. You have a name?”

Harry morphed his voice and responded in a baritone. “You may call me Odysseus.” Harry answered. “Evening’s not so good. Raphael and I managed to harm Asmodai, and the two of them are... out for the moment.”

“Asmodeus?” asked Dumbledore in surprise.

Harry looked at him inquiringly but the old man nodded, motioning him to continue. Shrugging, he did so. “We all discovered Snape’s new abilities. This town is in shambles, and I shudder to think about what will become of it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think that Voldemort must have decided to let his minions play chess with human lives.” Harry said, with a pointed look at Dumbledore, who took a bit of the criticism for himself and had the grace to blush. “The board is nothing but desolation, and, besides

Snape and Voldemort, there still are two demons to take into account.” He looked around him at the few members unsure of his loyalties, who were having him at wand point. “I’d like you to lower your wands and give me my weapons back. I’m no enemy.” he said, extending his four arms and shocking them.

“Don’t move, creature!” shouted Mundungus.

“We have no time for this.” Harry sighed and turned towards him. “Would you call Tonks a creature?”

“Why would I? She’s a hot number, and-”

No one had the time to react when Harry lunged at Mundungus, and, with all his might, punched him in the jaw, the wand forearm, the chest, and the family jewels. Bones snapped, and the man flew backwards, crashing in a nearby tree and then slumping to the floor in a barely twitching heap.

“I hate prejudice.” Harry grumbled, before turning to Dumbledore accusingly. “Why is he here?” he asked, pointing at the downed man.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t-”

Whatever he was going to say was drowned by an approaching chopper, and the wizards, most of them pureblood, looked upwards with interest as an American Sikorsky UH-60 – also known as Black Hawk – put itself in position.

In the meantime, Harry had gotten an idea of what the helicopter was going to do, and he also remembered one of Powell’s lessons: “An unmoving target is a dead target. You might delay the inevitable by having protection, but eventually, all kind of protection wear thin and fail.”

Harry knew he couldn’t move everyone at once, and resolved to buy some time. Using his two secondary arms and the wrist holsters there, Harry drew two wands – his Nundu one and his holly one – and,

using those and his ring at the same time, he shielded the whole area with physical protection fields.

It was just in time, because the chopper opened fire. “We have to get out of here!” he grunted through clenched teeth – from the effort of maintaining the shields.

Several Order members reacted quickly enough, Moody and Dumbledore being the first. The two of them sent Stunning spells towards the chopper, but these got sent back by a protection spell set around the helicopter. ‘Cunning.’ reflected Dumbledore, before turning to Harry.

“Where is Voldemort?” he asked, but Harry didn’t answer, perspiration beads trickling down his mask as he was pushing his magical energy onto the protection fields.

Moody understood, and he quickly organized the Order members, herding them towards one of the buildings to escape the bullets.

It wasn’t a good idea, really, because, from one of the side roads, several people were trickling into the place. Militia. And some of them were armed with RPG launchers.

From the corner of his eyes, Harry noticed the smoke following the projectile and yelled in frustration. If he dropped his shield, Dumbledore and McGonagall would be dead in seconds.

The wall behind them exploded, showering them with debris, and the Black Hawk gunner took advantage of the opportunity to reload his machine gun.

The lull proved to be beneficiary to Harry, though, as he took control of the pilot and planted instruction to leave.

At the same time, the anti-Apparation ward fell, and several popping sounds were heard, as if someone had just thrown corn into a campfire.

Harry looked around and noticed that Dumbledore was lying in the rubble, a gash going from the side of his head to his neck, and probably unconscious.

Once again, he was alone against overwhelming odds, but he still had cards up his numerous sleeves.

Not wanting to give the enemy time to regroup, he focused on Kentaro's identity and chanted "Expecto Patronum!"

That almost got the Death Eaters laughing until they noticed the result. Harry noticed, too, and cursed himself. Three wands. Three Patronuses. Three times an enormous draw on his already strained magic. Almost unconscious, he fell to his knees again.

When they noticed the formidable aspect of the three beasts, though, the Death Eaters didn't laugh anymore, and Harry smirked. 'Get them. And protect me.' he thought, and two of the beasts pounced forward, wreaking havoc in the Dark Lord's forces. The third one paced in front of Harry, occasionally jumping in the way of a curse.

Harry looked at the animal in wonder, but the reality of it all made him laugh. Of course! Beasts made entirely of magic could absorb magic naturally. It showed to be true as the three beasts had quickly outgrown their starting size.

The Death Eaters popped out, leaving several of them on the ground. Harry was ready to call his sabre-toothed tigers back, when he noticed that four characters had replaced the lowly followers. Bellatrix, Malfoy, Snape, and...

"Sssso... we meet again." Voldemort hissed.

Harry didn't want to engage in useless banter, though. Absently noting that Voldemort's eye socket was full again, he mentally sent his two attack tigers on his archenemy, only to have a beautiful female get in the middle. A beautiful naked female. And, once again, his hormones went haywire, preventing normal thought processes.

While Harry was figuratively stunned, Bellatrix looked at the now immobile tigers, and licked her lips. A Succubus' main goal is to suck the life force from people, including their magical power. And here was a concentration of magical power just waiting for her.

Dropping her hold of Harry, she jumped on the largest tiger and, opening her jaw to immense proportions, she swallowed it in one go. The magic was almost too much, and some escaped to the atmosphere, eventually returning to Harry's reserve. Bellatrix was positively glowing from the energy she had just taken, and it also increased her physique and her abilities. She was now eight feet tall, and her wings went higher than the small trees of the square – the few remaining standing, that is.

Harry had thought that the Succubus would kill him while he was defenceless, but he awoke to find her absorbing one of his tigers instead. While he was sorry and worried at the loss – each tiger represented roughly a fifth of his magic, plus the curses from the Death Eaters – he remembered Raphael's words before he left. "I give." he muttered, and, still playing the dumb and love-struck male, he silently moved the two remaining tigers towards the glowing demon.

You see, a Succubus isn't made with a fail-safe stopping mechanism. There is no way that they could be satiated by drawing energy from normal people all day long. And, when presented with such a wonderful dish, any of them would jump at the offer. That's why, giving a deaf ear to her master's urgent calls to stop, she too let her instincts rule and swallowed the offered tigers.

The last one proved to be too much, and the glowing and boost in power increased exponentially. Caught by unbearable pain, she finally understood what she had gotten herself into and shrieked. A second later, her body couldn't hold it anymore, and a resounding explosion sent her basic constituents – atoms – into the air with tremendous speed.

After shocking Voldemort, dropping the surrounding muggles to their knees, and shattering several walls and all the windows, the magic in these atoms returned to the air and flew in an invisible but steady

current back into Harry's reserve. "I get." he said, smiling and silently thanking his angel friend.

Voldemort snapped out of his shock, and glared at the entity in front of him. "What are you?"

Harry didn't answer and, getting to his feet, he slowly aimed his wands at Voldemort.

"Reducto!" came from Malfoy.

"Protego!" was Harry's reply, his Nundu wand making sure that Malfoy got his own spell reflected and amplified.

"Avada Kedavra!" was Voldemort's attack.

"Expelliarmus!" Harry said at the same time, using his secondary left hand, armed with his holly wand, for the Disarming spell. At the same time, he tried to use his ring to Summon a tangible obstacle in the path of the Killing Curse, but something happened.

Something that shocked all the wizards there.

Even Dumbledore, who had just painfully emerged from his wound-induced unconsciousness.

The ray of magic from Harry's Disarming spell met the green beam of the Killing Curse halfway between Harry and Voldemort, and the two mingled into a golden beam uniting the two wands. Said wands started to vibrate madly, and the two wizards had to grab them tightly to keep them from leaving their grasp.

Harry was surprised at this, and he suspected some foul play from Voldemort. To his increased astonishment, though, the Dark Lord seemed as flabbergasted as he was. Both recuperated quickly, though, and Voldemort motioned Malfoy forward before concentrating on the golden beam. Harry felt power going in his direction, evil power he wouldn't dare touch, and he pushed his own as well. The

golden beam seemed to pulsate, and a golden bead appeared in its middle.

Harry had barely enough time to notice Malfoy's presence, and the two of them exchanged a couple of spells, Harry using his Nundu wand. That took a bit of concentration from Harry, and the golden bead seemed to crawl closer to his holly wand. Noticing this, Harry focused on it as well, sending power and thoughts of protection in the bead.

Just as Malfoy was preparing his wand for a lethal spell, the golden bead seemed to expand outwards like a bubble, encasing Harry and Voldemort in an impenetrable shield. In the corner of his eye, Harry noticed Malfoy going to Snape and the two of them holding an animated discussion. It was all he grasped from the world outside the bubble, as his concentration returned to the bead that had re-formed on the beam. He pushed, and pushed, with all his mental might, and Voldemort did the same. The light seemed to go back and forth, but there was no clear winner.

Harry suddenly remembered his other wand and, keeping just enough concentration to prevent the ball from reaching him, he threw a spell at Voldemort.

The Dark Lord had felt his enemy's lapse in concentration and an evil smile had graced his lips as he pushed the bead forward. His expression quickly turned to one of shock, though, when he felt his vision falter, and then fail. Half of it.

Harry grabbed the magical eye he had just Summoned, smiling cheekily, before applying all his mental focus onto the connection between the two wands.

At that particular moment, Voldemort was disoriented, and his own concentration faded out. The ball of golden light reached his wand, entered it, and a magical explosion shook the town square.

The Dark Lord's wand had exploded, releasing the combined power of the two opponents at the same time. And, in a manner not unlike what happened when Harry wounded Malfoy lethally, ghostly shapes

escaped from the shards. Dozens of them. Hundreds, even. All victims of Voldemort's Killing Curse. After a moment of hesitation, they pounced on him and an unholy scream filled the place, only interrupted when the Dark Lord grabbed a portkey and fled. Following his lead, the two remaining opponents left as well, and Harry fell to his knees in exhaustion.

Feeling the tinge of pain, Harry absently looking at his left hand, and found out that his holly wand was no more, probably melted by the tremendous power it had channelled. His whole palm was charred, and Harry knew he would need some time to heal that wound properly.

As he was considering going back in time to do so, a soft hand covered his wounded one and a gentle voice grabbed his attention.

"Oh, my baby."

He looked up, and his eyes fell on the ghosts in front of him. The Dark Lord gone, most of them had disappeared, either shimmering out or flying away. In front of him were two particular ghosts he recognized instantly.

"Mum? Dad?" he asked, his voice wavering.

The two ghosts nodded, and Harry felt an overwhelming sensation in his chest, cleansing him from his direst deeds and liberating him somewhat.

"You have to leave, Harry." his mother said.

"But... are you... will I-?"

"We will accompany you, son." James Potter's ghost said, patting his shoulder and bringing a cold sensation there. "Oops, sorry." he said as Harry winced. The ghost's eyes were filled with mischief, though, and Harry smiled.

“Leave this place, Harry!” her mother interrupted, and Harry looked around, wondering what was wrong. And then he saw it. The armed muggles, who had been awed by the golden globe, were now somewhat free to continue their rampaging again, and Harry knew he had to leave or he’d be torn to pieces like the soldiers he had seen previously. However...

However, Dumbledore was still there, his legs mangled by some debris resulting from the Succubus’ explosion. As it was, the old man was barely holding himself with his arms. Next to him was McGonagall, looking nothing like her usual self, as her hair was dishevelled and her outer robe in tatters. Harry also knew there were others behind – and under – the collapsed structure.

He dashed towards the two of them and grabbed them before Apparating out. It was just in time, too, as bullets started to rain in the place the three of them were standing before.

“Do not move.” he told them when they were safely positioned in the gaseous reality, holding each other. “And don’t try to Apparate.”

McGonagall was barely conscious, but Dumbledore nodded, his knowledge of muggle weaponry making him understand the possible consequences of disobeying.

Harry then recuperated the Order members from behind the rubble. It was just in time, too. Through sheer luck, a few of them had managed to cast a protecting charm around their group just before the wall collapsed, burying them alive. And their spells had started to falter when the magical explosion had shaken the surroundings. Harry got them in the gaseous reality too, all of them alive – although some were wounded or unconscious. After bringing everyone in the same place and telling them to join hands, he started to move the whole group upwards. He stopped after a dozen yards, though, remembering something.

Using Levitation to steady himself in the air, he Apparated out and Summoned all his belongings. His crossbows were a crushed assembly of metal, but Merlin’s wand was intact, bar a few scratches.

While he was recovering the remains of his holly wand, he had the idea of getting the remains of Voldemort's. After stowing what was left of them in Unbreakable bottles, he returned to the gaseous reality, where the Order members were looking at him with a mix of awe, distrust, and concern.

"Ready to head back?" he asked.

"Where are we?" Moody asked. "What is this place?"

Harry didn't want to give the wrong people too much information, but he knew that most of them were trustworthy. "We are in what I call the "gaseous reality" for lack of a better term. That's where everyone goes to Apparate."

The awed and concerned gazes turned into shocked and disbelieving ones.

"Listen." he added. "Some of you are hurt, and, if you want to be torn to pieces by the locals, just stay. I intend to go to Hogwarts and drop the willing in the Hospital wing."

Wrong thing to say. A chorus of "you can't Apparate in Hogwarts" filled his ears and he decided to stop them before the discussion went out of hand.

" ENOUGH!" he roared, and silence filled the gaseous place. "Questions later. Just keep holding hands with everybody. It is a life and death situation." he finished, indicating some unconscious members who were still bleeding.

"He's right!" Moody exclaimed. "Do as he says, people!"

Then, starting slowly but quickly gathering speed, the group of people moved northwards.
In Egypt...

The Dark Lord was seething. Again. And he didn't have a wand to express his displeasure. A couple of recruits took the brunt of it and he finally calmed enough to hold intelligent discussion.

"What happened?" he demanded, once again realizing that two of his allies were missing. That thought led to his recent loss of his wand and of his recently-acquired eye, and he angrily slammed his tail on the floor, cracking a few tiles.

"We don't know." Malfoy said, his voice as commanding as ever. "Asmodai isn't just any demon. He can't be killed."

"So... I repeat... What happened?" Voldemort all but shouted.

"We could communicate with him to get the answer about his current state." Snape wheezed. "Not today, though." he added. The man appeared really tired, and Voldemort knew that there had been some massive spellwork downtown.

"Very well." he said. "Tomorrow night, then."

Snape was caught by a coughing fit at that moment, and he merely nodded, before leaving towards his apartments.

"He's unreliable." Malfoy said coolly when the door was closed.

The Dark Lord looked at him inquiringly. "Explain."

"When you were duelling with that... thing... he didn't help."

Voldemort looked thoughtful at this revelation, but dismissed it. "I know of Severus' loyalty, and I now know that the summoned spirit is similar to the host. Don't forget that his magic is different, though. Speaking of which, did you notice his charms in that muggle town?"

Malfoy smiled. "Indeed. Quite a compulsion. I doubt anyone could stay there for more than a day, now, without getting a thirst for violence."

“And death.” the Dark Lord concluded.
Hogwarts...

Using the gaseous reality, Harry was moving through space again.

After leaving the Order members in the infirmary, he had had a serious – and private – chat with select Order members. With a quiet mental talk, Dumbledore had made sure of his identity before vouching for him to McGonagall and Moody. The retired Auror, sitting because he lost his prosthesis during the fight, had coughed at that moment, and, suspiciously, it had sounded like "Snape." To calm his paranoid friend, Dumbledore had spoken an Oath that proved that he wasn't blackmailed or held by Harry in any way. The rest of the discussion had been a debriefing about Voldemort's recent actions and losses.

It was way past curfew when Harry finally reached his quarters. He had the surprise of finding his friends and Luna there, reading or playing cards quietly. When he Apparated in, they shot to their feet, and Tracey lunged at him. He had had the presence of mind to make his mask disappear, but his overall appearance shocked his friends nonetheless.

“Four... arms?” Susan gasped.

Harry smiled. “There are some perks of being a Metamorphmagus and an Occlumens.”

“Occlumens?”

“You know... concentration, focus...” he said, before noticing that they weren't really listening. “Well, I'm quite tired, so I'll sit down and-”

“How did it go?” Tracey asked.

He smiled grimly. “Tough. I thought I'd...” He almost added "die" before remembering that the people there cared for him and that sort of line would have them in conniptions. “We got two of them, and

Voldemort is wandless and half-blind again, now." he said, juggling with the now-inert magical eye.

"Any..." Tracey started, swallowed, and continued in a smaller voice. "Any casualties?"

Harry remembered about everything, and he shook his head. "Not from our side. Well... Raphael is gone, but-"

"What?" Ron and Ginny asked at the same time.

"He told me that he had to "lick his wounds" after his fight with a demon. And that we'll see Bill back soon." Harry added gently, sending calming thoughts towards the two Weasleys.

Now that they were reassured about his state and about Raphael's, they led him to the half-circle of sofas in front of the fire and pressed him for the whole story. As Susan and Luna didn't know about it, he had to explain his first encounter with the demons as well, and it was only four hours later that their curiosity was sated.

At that moment, though, they were all tired, yawning widely and eyes drooping. Noticing the advanced time and remembering that the next day would be Monday, Harry decided to introduce them to the joys of Time Turning. He started by Apparating with them in his secondary bedroom so that they wouldn't come across their past selves. He then made everyone link hands in the middle of their group and encircled the joined hands with the Time Turner's chain, before turning the hourglass backwards six times.

After dropping each of them in their respective beds, where they fell asleep almost immediately, Harry followed suit and slept soundly. His ghostly parents arrived soon afterwards, floating across the bedroom's walls. They looked tired too, and kissed their son's forehead before disappearing.

Harry spent the whole night with a smile on his lips.

To be continued in next chapter: Bedlam Bridge...

Another fight already?
The Dark Lord won't sleep, you know.
In any case, be ready
Because others will follow.

Chapter 31 – Bedlam Bridge

posted March 10th, 2006

The following days were a whirlwind of activity for Harry. Even turning back time to repeat each day was starting to wear him out. The first time around, he taught his courses and clubs as usual, using his free time to take care of the administrative side of this – grading parchments and organizing his lesson plans. The second time around, he started by spending a few hours training the Venetian knights. He had done so more intensely before, but he had something else to occupy his mind now: trying to find traces of Dark activities in Egypt and Europe. On that schedule, another couple of hours were dedicated to his apprenticeship with Flamel; and he also spent a few hours in Japan with Goken.

Harry's Japanese mentor had witnessed his success in mastering the four arms, and had been delighted to hear that Harry was trying to explain the rules of the Bushido to his students – even if it was only in a school club for the moment. After authorizing Harry to duplicate his booklet for the club members, Goken had offered to enhance Harry's knowledge with the use of unusual weapons. He gave a few memories about that to a curious Harry, and, in the first week of October, the two of them started working with Kobudo weapons. When Harry discovered them, he was a little unsure at first, but Goken's memories kicked in, and he quickly found out what to do.

He started with the staff – the bo, as Goken called it – and the two of them spent a whole day sparring with it. Over the week, Harry would learn – or relearn, since he had the memories already – the use of the sai, the nunchaku, the tonfa, and the kama. Together, these five were the main weapons of the fighting style known as Okinawan Kobudo. The sai was a sword-like weapon with prongs on either side of a completely dulled blade, designed to disarm and stun, and it was generally used with another sai or two. The nunchaku was a flail-like weapon made of two small staves connected with a cord – or a chain, but it was noisier – which the wielder flails around in order to strike an opponent at small ranges. A short time later, Goken would also introduce Harry to a more complicated version of the weapon, made of three pieces of wood instead of two – the advantages being a longer range, and the third piece of wood allowing even more

unexpected moves and angles of attack than the regular nunchaku. The tonfa was easily recognized by Harry as the nightstick used by police forces around the world. The last weapon, the kama, was simply a sickle with a longer handle. Once again, after Harry would learn to be completely proficient with it, Goken would raise the challenge by giving him a more complicated weapon, and this time, it was the kusari-gama. It was the same weapon, but a chain was attached to it, with a dead weight at its end. And, once again, Harry would learn to use the complex weapon to the best of his ability.

Since he had Goken's memories, Harry would spend merely a month learning to wield all these weapons, and, on the first weekend of November, the two of them would travel to Okinawa to buy Harry his own set of weapons. They wouldn't happen to know that he'd use one of them a mere couple days afterwards.

Back in October, though, Harry was still weary of his last battle, and, the week-end afterwards, he decided to repeat the upcoming week days a second time. Using that additional time to relax, he was finally able to spend quality time with his friends and the ghosts of his parents.

And, despite having spent the last years in a run and being hardened by it, Harry Potter cried.

They were his parents! Killed at the beginning of their family life, their dreams shattered before even taking off. Despite having his cousins – whom he still considered as his siblings, given that he had spent a long time doing so – and his friends, Harry realized that he would never have a true sibling, magical and all. Mulling about lost opportunities and rejoicing at being together again, the three Potters shared tears for a few days, until they came to grips with the situation and started to discuss about other things. After all, despite the fact that his parents were dead, Harry hadn't spent a less joyful childhood. In fact, thinking about it, they realized that it could have been much worse if Voldemort hadn't been reduced to a shadow, all these years ago.

Harry learnt more about the enmity between Snape and his father, and the two of them laughed when James retold a few select memories. When Harry reminded his mother that Snape wasn't the unsure teen anymore and that he had chosen his side, Lily stopped her disapproving frown.

Over the next days, Harry introduced or re-introduced his parents to his family and friends.

They made a trip to Japan and discussed with the Dursleys, Petunia and Lily bursting into tears frequently that day.

They also met Sirius and Remus afterwards. The reunion between the Marauders was a mix of tears and laughter, and Harry and Lily had to separate them to stop their discussion about pranks. They settled down and discussed more calmly about each other's lives before Voldemort killed James and Lily – for Harry – and afterwards – for James and Lily. When the two living Marauders left that evening, Harry had learnt many things about his parents, and about their friends.

They visited the Headmaster, with whom they had another discussion, and the old man had the grace to formulate a heartfelt apology to the three of them – Dumbledore knew that Harry could tell if it wasn't sincere.

Finally, Harry presented his friends and his girlfriend to his parents and vice-versa. It was awkward at first – James and Lily just starting to grasp that their son had grown into a normal teenager despite his power – but the easy-going nature of the group of friends broke the ice and, here again, Harry had to hear stories of him wearing nappies, to the hilarity of all those present.

All in all, October was a busy and emotional month. Or rather, concerning Harry, it was a busy month interwoven with an emotional one – for a total duration of two months and a half.

On his daily trips around Europe, trying to find traces of Voldemort, Harry often stumbled across oddities, plain danger, and both.

As he travelled through the gaseous reality most of the time, he found several houses protected by anti-Apparation wards, some of these wards completely solid while others were wobbly, and he remembered the ones he had already seen – the ones which were keyed to certain conditions.

In his travels, he also met unsavoury people, and the first he met taught him a lesson: the ruffian was a recidivist, and there was simply no possibility to change his ways short of revamping his mind. For the first time since Rita Skeeter's mental overhaul, Harry went into another mind with the goal of changing it. In there, however, there were too many nasty memories, and he decided to update his plan a bit. Instead of checking each memory and removing or modifying those that weren't appropriate – a long process implying he reviewed the man's hideous activities – he decided to create a little kernel of memories in the man's mind. A core of principles. And he dubbed it Guilt.

The process was quite easy, and, when he left the brute's mind, he saw that the man's face was now scrunched in guilt. Weeping, the reformed brute headed out of the alleyway towards the nearest police station. Harry refined the process a few times over his travels, and that way of treating the criminals and thugs seemed to function quite well, whether they were wizards or muggles.

Yes, he met wizard thugs too. Not even Death Eaters – their memories were clear about that. On one of these encounters, the brutes were simply taking "advantage" of a muggle girl and intended to Obliviate her afterwards. Or not. Harry had expressed his discontentment by breaking a few bones, before handing out the Guilt core. He then healed the girl as much as he could – mentally as well as physically – before leaving the place.

On a particularly cold day of November, he was travelling between Britain and Egypt as usual, keeping quite low from the ground in case he found interesting things on the way – he often changed routes between Hogwarts and his target to see if there were some suspicious activities going on – and he stopped short. Just in the middle of a snow-covered town, where a stone bridge was crossing a frozen river.

Once again, several brutes were manhandling an innocent soul. This time, though, the brutes were in military uniform and had guns, and Harry spent a few seconds pondering whether his interference would have a political impact or not. When the young woman shrieked, her clothes torn and the men's rough hands all over her, Harry decided that he didn't care about repercussions and he Apparated in.

"Stop that right now!" he yelled, hoping to get all of them to stop at the sound of his voice.

Unfortunately, it didn't seem to be the case, as two of the men continued to paw her. The other five looked at him with a wary expression, and one of them stepped forward. His numerous insignias designated him as their leader, and when he asked Harry a question, his authoritative tone of voice confirmed it. It was more a bark than anything else, in fact.

Harry blinked, barely understanding a few words. Since it meant that he didn't have the language package relative to that country, he quickly copied the man's. At the same time, he found about his identity and current state of sanity, or lack thereof. Actually, the man was already tumbling into madness, and the war wasn't helping.

Replaying the question in his mind, Harry realized that the captain seemed convinced he was a terrorist. He smiled. Since he always responded in kind, against violent people in the like of him and his posse, he was much worse than a terrorist.

"I'm not a terrorist." he said, advancing toward them.

The man yelled a quick order, and the other soldiers started to surround him. Harry noticed that they had left the half-dressed woman against the parapet, and he smirked. Two days before, he had bought the Okinawan weapon set with Goken – plus a three-section staff and a kusari-gama – and had charmed them already. With a thought and an appropriate jab of magic, his three-part staff appeared in his hand, and he started to swing it around. The six mountains of muscle noticed that he was armed, and they drew the

short sword that came with their uniform before advancing towards him. Harry had a longer range, though, and with the articulated staff's unexpected angles of attack, he successfully disarmed the soldiers, even disabling some of them by breaking their arm. And he wasn't even out of breath.

But he had made a mistake. The captain had retreated and, his gun out, he was now holding the woman at point blank range. The man was alternating between threatening words and nervous cackle. Visibly, not only was his current job leading him towards the asylum, but he was also the less than courageous type.

Now angry, Harry Apparated just behind him, and, after kicking the gun away, he grabbed the man and unceremoniously tossed him in the air. The man flew with a high-pitched scream and landed in a pile of snow next to his underlings. Harry hadn't been gentle, but the man's twitching legs told him that he was still alive.

The others reacted as he expected them to: they got their guns out and, turning towards him, they started firing.

Harry hadn't waited for them, though. He had grabbed the woman and had Apparated out. She was frantically trying to defend herself, and it took him several seconds of sending calming thoughts towards her for her to calm down. Once she was receptive enough, he Transfigured her clothes so that they were repaired. And clean. She was talking rapidly, now, switching back and forth from a teary expression of thanks to a questioning glance around.

"Stay calm." he told her, but she was too distraught by the whole situation to comply without him calming her again.

After doing so, he looked around, but the soldiers had disappeared from the bridge. Thinking that, as a native, she would find her way easier out of the gaseous reality, he Apparated back with her.

...and immediately felt observed.

He noticed that the soldiers were still there, although they had moved away by a couple hundred yards. Their captain was yelling madly in a portable radio.

‘Uh oh.’ Harry thought. Openly fighting military forces in a country at war was not a good idea. Keeping a wary eye at his surroundings while staying next to the parapet, he tried to find a peaceful alternative to the unfolding situation. A steady wind picked up, sending his hair and cape flowing backwards. At the same time, the clouds parted, and some of the soldiers nearby gasped at the sight. There was a man who had appeared out of nowhere, disabled them all, and disappeared right afterwards to take care of the woman they had been molesting. Said woman was on her knees beside him, an arm clutching her cape and the other gripping his leg while he was shot to the clear sky, his eyes glowing and his attitude defiant.

Even the noise of approaching motors didn’t dissolve the image, and it was only when a couple explosions boomed in the small town that time seemed to flow forward again. Once again, though, Harry’s senses had gone haywire, warning him about the danger, and he grabbed the woman and Apparated out again, just as the two tanks opened fire. Under Harry’s helpless gaze, their shells completely destroyed the oldest stone bridge of Bosnia, crashing it in the Neretva River, 25 yards below.

In the gaseous reality with the frightened woman, Harry shook his head at the hopeless battle around him. As the clouds closed again, more snow falling on the depressing sight, Harry left and, after grasping the way to the woman’s home from her mind, he brought her there. After erasing her memory of the event, he headed back to Hogwarts, his heart heavy about the humans’ propensity to wage war and to drag innocents into them.

Since there hadn’t been Death Eater activities, the Order of the Phoenix had very few things to do. Even though, they had decided to convene at least once a month, and Harry attended the meeting scheduled a couple days after his Bosnian adventure.

There wasn’t much to say, but something caught his attention. It was Alastor Moody telling the Order about past encounters with Dark wizards. It wasn’t the fact that Moody used his tale to yell "Constant

Vigilance" every few sentences, but the fact that the man had mentioned the destruction of the Dark artefacts his opponent was using. Harry remembered the stash of items he had plundered from Malfoy Manor – it was when he had spent the beginning of the previous Christmas vacation at the Malfoys', posing as Draco. He decided that, if he wanted to sort them out, he could enlist the grizzled Auror's help. He checked the protection around the man's mind and found them quite impressive. After all, it would have been a shame for someone like Alastor Moody not to be paranoid with his mind defences as well.

When the meeting ended, Harry approached the retired Auror before he could leave.

"Mr Moody..." he started.

The addressed man interrupted him with a sweep of the hand. "No "Mister" here, Evans. Soldiers call themselves by names only. What do you want?"

Harry looked around. "I have questions that your expertise only can answer. As it is dangerous things, I'd like us to discuss about them in private."

Mad-Eye looked at him appreciatively. "Paranoid, much?" he asked with a glint of amusement in the eye. "Don't answer that. It's alright to be. As I often say..."

"Constant Vigilance, I know." Harry interjected.

Moody looked at him strangely. "No! I mean... yes, but it's not what I had in mind. I wanted to say that we'd be better safe than sorry."

Harry acquiesced, and he led the man to his private quarters. Thinking about it on the way, he was thankful to have long since managed to obscure his second set of rooms from peeping items in the like of Moody's rotating eye. Once there, the old man applied a couple of privacy charms on top of Harry's... just to be sure.

Harry disabled the protections he had put around a particular drawer of his desk and grabbed the reduced trunk containing the Malfoys' artefacts collection and potion stash. He placed it on the floor, between Moody and him, and enlarged it back to its usual size.

"I have come across several artefacts in my travels," he started, his hand on the lid, "and I'd like to know what I can do with them."

"This trunk is full of Dark artefacts?" Moody asked, impressed that a young man could find so many of them in his supposedly short career.

Harry smirked and opened the trunk. "Yes." he merely said, and Moody's eyes opened wide, his magical eye almost falling from its socket, when he noticed that the trunk's inside was enlarged.

Alastor Moody recovered quickly – it was one of his abilities, otherwise he wouldn't have survived so long. "What do you want to do with them?" he asked.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. I want to know what I can do with them, first."

"Well..." Moody scratched his grizzled hair. "They can be destroyed, which is what I usually do with thoroughly Dark artefacts."

"Usually?" Harry asked. "Thoroughly?"

Moody nodded, his eyes still on the dangerous treasure in front of him. "Some Dark artefacts can't be destroyed completely, so I either give them to the Unspeakables, or I store them in a secure location. The artefacts that are only slightly Dark, I either find a way to use them without endangering myself, or I destroy them as well. Destroying them can be interesting for rituals."

"Rituals?" Harry asked softly, not wanting the cautious man to stop his revelations there.

"When a Dark artefact is destroyed, its power can be siphoned for dark purposes. If the artefact contains slightly dark magic only, its

power can be used for whatever purpose we want.” The man’s gaze fell on Harry and he frowned suspiciously. “Why do you ask?”

“As I told you, I don’t know much about dark artefacts. I only stowed them away, wanting to learn about what you told me. Could you give me a crash course?”

“I don’t know, Evans. Despite the fact that Dumbledore induced you in the Order, I don’t know you that well.”

Harry smiled. “Constant Vigilance, right?”

Moody acquiesced, his gaze returning to the stash of items.

“What do you want to know, then?” Harry asked, a twinkle in his eyes. “My real name?”

That got Moody’s attention. “What do you mean?” the man asked, his hand on his wand.

“Dumbledore knows,” Harry said, raising his empty hands in the universally recognize gesture of peace, “and that’s partly why he trusts me. After all, after searching for me for such a long time, it’s only natural that I show up under his nose.”

A pause. “I repeat my question: what do you mean?” Moody asked.

“Hold your wand.” Harry asked. “And remember that, I still am the one you know as Henry Evans.”

Without breaking eye contact, he morphed into his real appearance and a 13-year old boy was soon looking at a shocked man. “I’m Harry Potter.”

“Potter? But...”

He shut up suddenly, and Harry could almost see the wheels turning in the man’s mind in his expression. When Moody stopped thinking about it, his gaze was trained on the boy. “Nice to meet you, Potter.

Finally.” A short pause, while Harry nodded. “Who knows? And how did Dumbledore react?”

“Quite well, everything considered.” Harry answered. “He agreed to let me live as I wanted.”

“Good job you did.” Moody nodded emphatically. “Convincing him to give his trump card his freedom back.” A pause. “And you did a great job disposing of these Death Eaters. And these demons.”

“Thank you. And the ones who know are Sirius and Remus-”

“Understandable.”

“And Madam Bones. And Dumbledore, of course.” He paused, not wanting to tell the man about his friends among the students. “No one knows about these artefacts, though.” he said, pointing at the opened trunk between them. “Now, do you agree to help me?”

“Only if you tell me where you got them from.” Moody answered with a smile.

Harry felt that he would get Moody’s help even if he didn’t answer, but his reply could facilitate the artefacts’ sorting so he complied. “From the Malfoys.” he merely said.

Moody’s eyebrows shot up. “The Malfoys?”

Harry nodded. “I went there under Malfoy’s appearance. The young one, I mean. And I found a hidden stash I decided to grab out of their reach.”

“Good decision, lad.” the old Auror commented. “After all, they wouldn’t call the Aurors for an investigation on a missing pile of Dark items, now would they?”

Harry smiled and didn’t answer the rhetorical question.

And the two of them spent the next few hours sorting the items in the trunk. Harry learnt a couple of interesting spells relative to aura detection and charm identification, and Moody left with the trunk and a good part of its content, after having told Harry that he'd find a way to get rid of most of them.

Harry was left with a few legal items – in fact, not all artefacts were dark – and several ones that were questionable, and Moody had made him promise that he wouldn't be seen using these.

The legal items were a girdle enhancing one's physical strength by using their magic; a pair of bracers, one being charmed for physical defence while the other was for magical protection; and four booklets able to send things written in their pages to one of the others. Paranoid as he was, Moody had thoroughly checked that none of them were linked to a "master" book or any similar spying device: it wouldn't be good to send confidential information to dark wizards.

The questionable items included the bracers of confusion that Draco had worn in the martial arts tournament; a sword that weakened one's opponents by stealing magic from their blood when a wound was inflicted; and a couple books about rituals – Moody had judged that Harry could benefit from the knowledge within, but he had advised him to avoid the Dark ones.

The potions seemed properly labelled, but Moody frowned, his nature compelling him to distrust anything from the Malfoys. Harry assured him that he'd see with Flamel whether they were genuine, and the grizzled wizard simply put a distinctive mark on the labels of the most dubious potions.

As soon as he was alone, Harry thought about the communication booklets and his friends. There were fewer books than he had friends so, despite the heavy charms on them, he tried to use the Duplication charm to copy them – he knew that, the more magic an item contained, the more difficult it was to duplicate it; things like wands didn't work, for instance. He also knew that the charms on a Duplicated items were a less stable than on the original and that, magically speaking, a Duplicate of a Duplicate wouldn't function at all. Flitwick had talked about Arithmancy equations, but the gist of it was

that the copy of a permanently charmed item generally worked a year before its magic dissipated. They could be recharged, of course.

Thankfully, it worked well with the books, and, less than ten minutes later, the whole group of friends was there. Harry told them about the books, and gave a duplicate to each of them. Tracey was a bit apprehensive at first, remembering the fiasco of Voldemort's diary, but Harry explained that it was only a communication device, mentally soothing her at the same time. She finally relented, and Harry started to explain how they worked.

The last page of each book contained a short description of their use, as well as a few fields that one could fill to customize theirs. One of these fields was to receive a password, and another was for a drop of blood: the blood linked the book to its owner, who never had to speak the password to use it afterwards. If specified, the password allowed someone else to open it, but they wouldn't be able to send messages.

Having heard about electronic mail by his cousin James and his friend Jorg, Harry absently reflected that it was very similar, to the point of having aliases and diffusion lists that each could establish. There were even options to send parts of one's configuration to another. The books had only a few pages, but Harry and Flitwick would later add a Duplicating charm to add more pages to store the messages sent and received, these pages being able to be torn out to have a "print-out" of the messages.

When his friends left, Harry decided to repeat the process with Sirius and Remus, and with Dumbledore as well, offering the Headmaster one of the four originals, thus giving him the possibility to duplicate it himself for use among the Order the Phoenix, Hogwarts' staff, and possibly the students as well.

At the same time, in a carefully hidden temple in Egypt...

Voldemort was pacing. News was not good. In the British Isles, the campaigns for violence towards muggles weren't yielding as much feedback as usual, recruitment-wise.

His archdemon ally was still unreachable. Snape had tried to communicate with him with a spell of his own, with no success so far.

Thinking of Snape made the Dark Lord swear again: the possessed Potion Master had been asked for more Demon-Summoning potion, but the memories of that potion's recipe seemed to be scrambled in the man's mind... according to Snape himself. Try as he might, Voldemort was unable to pierce Snape's mind defences in a normal setting, and he had the feeling that his ally might not see in a good eye a forced entry in his mind.

Finally, there was the problem of Hogwarts. Among the dozen faithful followers having kids at school, there had been no interesting feedback at all. Sure, the brats were sending their weekly observations, but it was always about inconsequential things, like schedules or love interests. He shuddered at the thought.

The only positive thing in the last month was his new eye. It held even more charms than the previous one, and Voldemort was now able to see through most illusions. Remembering the fight in Somalia, Voldemort had also charmed the eyeball not to be Summoned in that way. Or in any other way.

He was going to summon a new recruit to pass his nerves on, when the door to Snape's apartments opened and the man appeared. "My lord, I have found something of interest."

"What is it?" Voldemort demanded. 'And it better be of real interest.' he mentally added. Since the battle, Snape had spent most of his time buried in tomes about magic theory. As if he didn't know how to cast a spell at all – despite the impressive events in Somalia.

Snape turned around and spoke to someone in the corridor behind him. "Come."

In front of Voldemort's surprised eyes, another Severus Snape entered the room.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked.

“An application of magic of my world with a magic of yours.” the second Snape answered. “I’m a human-created construction of magic, entwined with what you’d use to make your talking portraits: a snapshot of one’s mind.”

“My host was very good in the mind arts.” the first Snape repeated. “And I’m quite proud to present you my first golem.”

“Wait a second.” Voldemort interrupted. “You duplicated yourself?”

The two Snapes winced, and the first one answered. “I wasn’t able to include the magic ability.”

“For all intent and purposes, I’m what you’d call a muggle.” the golem said. “But I’m as intelligent as my creator, and I will surely help him in tasks not involving magic.”

“Research, Herbology, and Potions.” the original Snape concluded, and both nodded to each other before turning towards Voldemort.

It took several seconds for Voldemort to grasp the first possibilities offered by this, and he started to smile like snakes did when they were happy – not a pretty sight, actually. Since he was technically a half-blood, the Dark Lord had knowledge of how things could be done in the muggle way – even if he preached the pureblood supremacy – and he knew that such clones could be very useful. “Yes, very useful indeed.” he said aloud, before looking at the original Snape intently. “You told me that it was magic from your world. Is it possible to teach the spell to some of my followers?”

“I tried to teach the simplest spell to them already, but they didn’t grasp it, and I had other fishes to fry.” Snape answered. “And the golem-creation spell is really advanced.”

“Very well. How many can you create?”

“I have material to make two. Now that I have my clone, some parts can be shortened.” He reflected for a few seconds. “A week per golem.”

“Very well.” the Dark Lord answered, his own calculations done. “You will replicate Malfoy and Jugson first.”

“I’m not sure that I can do a duplicate of a demon’s mind.” Snape said. “It would be a first, even for me, and it could be really dangerous. For all involved parties.”

“Do you refuse?” Voldemort asked curtly.

“Not if you order me to do it.” Snape replied in the same tone.

The Dark Lord thought about the other candidates and decided on someone else. “You’ll do Nott and Jugson. The two clones will be used for appearances, and the real ones will head our next raids.”

The two Snapes acquiesced, and Voldemort merely nodded, his thoughts focused on world conquest plans.

As usual.

Hogwarts, a few days later...

November was advancing slowly, and the weather was going from cold to chilly, setting the pace for a freezing winter. Except from the classes happening outside – Care of Magical Creatures, mainly – the only outside activity was Quidditch. Because of the Quidditch international tournament, held in June, the normal schedule was hastened somewhat, and the Ravenclaw-Hufflepuff game took place mid-November. Unlike in the previous game, where Gryffindor barely won over Slytherin with the score of 300 to 290, Ravenclaw flattened Hufflepuff with a score of 250 to 20.

The same day, just before lunch, Dumbledore congratulated the winning team for winning, and the two of them for participating, before placing a particular announcement: to the student body, he introduced their new Astronomy teacher.

The Headmaster had finally found a replacement for Sinistra, in the person of Wu Mei Xun-Quan – a name that could be westernised as Mei "Xun-Quan" Wu –, a beautiful and reserved Chinese witch in her forties. Few students dared take advantage of her apparent timidity, though, as Dumbledore introduced her with her title of martial art champion. The ones who tried to abuse her patience found a hairpin suddenly imbedded in their desk, right between two of their fingers. Needless to say, nobody wreaked havoc in her class.

Harry started using the communication booklets more than owls, especially with his family in Japan – to whom he left another Duplicate. The members of the Order of the Phoenix and of Hogwarts' staff had one as well, but Dumbledore was reticent for the students to have access to that tool, arguing that it would give them an incentive to cheat during exams. Knowing that it was indeed true, Harry had relented, but he hadn't told the old man that his friends had one, merely advising them to keep theirs to the bottom of their bags when out of the dorms.

Harry managed the clubs quite well also, and their subscription rose in numbers week after week. More and more students started to display their badge proudly, especially if they had silver or gold pins on it, but, after a short time, Harry noticed that it was giving people important information about the students' strengths and weaknesses. He decided to apply his own advice about hiding one's true strength and started to charm the members' badge so that they wouldn't show the pins themselves but a total score. After a brief discussion with Flitwick and Dumbledore over breakfast, he had decided that one pewter pin counted as one point towards that score, a bronze one as two, a silver one as three, and a gold one as five. To people who were had a professional level in one of the clubs, he gave a platinum pin worth ten points. And to the few people further that level – like Flitwick in magical duelling – he gave a diamond-like pin worth fifteen points.

The Bushido club started well, too. Beginning with his close friends, it filled quickly in a mere couple of weeks. Students didn't attend for the same reason, and some were only there only because the weapons – a piece of wood transfigured in a dulled wooden katana – looked

cool! Harry also started to share memories with his closest friends again, and he bought them some blunted Samurai weapons for their training.

Harry was giving a Duplicated translation of the Bushido booklet to each member, and he spent quite some time explaining about the whole attitude behind it. And each House could find their important qualities in there: Gryffindors were those showing Courage; Hufflepuffs displayed Loyalty; Ravenclaws could stretch their studious nature to Honesty and Wisdom; and Slytherins were those showing the most Self-control. Of course, there were exceptions, and a few students dropped the club after a couple sessions. Most of the attendance stayed, though, and learnt about the other virtues extolled by the Japanese Warrior's way of life: Rectitude; Benevolence; Honour; and, of course, Respect.

Near the end of November, Harry's challenge was met again, and, as the clubs held more and more people, the students answering the challenge decided to take advantage of their numbers and chose the all-out fighting. The group was made of five Ravenclaw upperclassmen who thought they had studied their teacher's abilities more profoundly than their Gryffindor predecessor. It was true, indeed: as Ravenclaws, they had studied whatever abilities Harry displayed. However, following his own advice, Harry hadn't shown them everything he knew – it would have shocked them.

Harry suspected that the attendance would reach record levels, and he had booked the Great Hall for the fight. Like the previous time, he gave Dumbledore the responsibility for protecting the spectators, as well as judging the fight. And, like the previous time, the arena had been customized. Since it was an all-out fighting, the middle of the Great Hall had been filled with illusory trees and rocky outcroppings which were translucent for the onlookers outside of the magical protection field. To emulate the weather outside, the whole scene was covered in snow.

Once again, Harry decided to limit the amount of abilities he displayed, and prepared his actions accordingly. He was standing in the middle of the area, waiting for the Headmaster to signal the

beginning of the fight. Once his opponents had taken their positions, Dumbledore exclaimed "begin"... and all hell broke loose.

Harry's first action was to cast a reflecting shield on himself, and it was just in time, as three curses were thrown at him from different angles. Moving around to make the beams reflect at the appropriate angle, Harry sent most of them towards his first attacker. The Stunning curses, recognizable by their red beam, struck the surprised target who slumped on the ground, unconscious.

Harry decided to leave him there for the moment, to see if the others would think to awaken him. While the other two threw a hasty shield themselves, he tapped his own head with his wand, chanting the words of the Disillusionment charm. Dumbledore noticed this, and, after a short incantation, Harry was made visible for the people behind the protection dome.

Harry deliberately walked towards his second attacker, leaving footprints in the snow. These students had learnt about the charm, and he hoped that they would react appropriately there too, checking for hints. Unfortunately, only one of them did, and it wasn't his current target. The aim of the incoming Stunning curse was off, though, and it struck the snow a couple yards behind Harry. Wanting to see what they would do without magic, Harry Silenced his attacker – the Silencing spell belonging to those without a visible beam, it didn't reveal his location.

Harry finished his approach and, a quick jab later – striking the exposed vital points in the girl's neck –, she was unconscious. Harry then climbed on a nearby tree and observed his surroundings. The one who had been Silenced tried to approach his last two remaining friends, only to find himself Petrified by friendly fire. A Finite Incantatem later, he was standing and speaking again, and the three of them scanned their surroundings. They noticed Harry's footprints and, after applying the Disillusionment charm themselves, they started to follow the track. Not wanting to advertise the fact that he was able to sense their location, Harry aimed an explosion curse in front of them, and they found themselves covered in snow. Two of them did the right thing and ducked for cover in separate directions, while the third stayed where he was, trying to pinpoint his attacker.

Harry Stunned him without remorse, before Summoning his unconscious body, managing to stop the spell in time so that he was resting near his unconscious housemate.

He knew the two others had noticed his position by now, and he applied the Levitation charm on himself before pushing the tree trunk he had been holding onto: levitating wasn't flying, and lateral movement could only exist by external influence. Having pushed the tree quite forcefully, Harry found himself floating behind the "enemy" lines, and he noticed that one of the two students was circling around his previous position while the other was casting Stunning spell after Stunning spell in the trees.

"Macula scribus." Harry whispered, using a spell that all the students knew by now. A drop of red ink shot from his wand on the attacker's shoulder. Said attacker looked at the spot in wonder, and his expression turned fearful suddenly. Yelling, he whirled around, trying to spot his adversary and to start a spell at the same time, but Harry cancelled the Levitation spell and dropped on him. The student's magical shield didn't protect him against a physical attack, and he was quickly put into slumber.

The last student seemed to have the same idea he had, as ink splashed on his crouched shape, revealing his location. Harry sensed that the last student was charging him, but he decided to play with the rules he had set beforehand, and only sent ink in his direction before doing anything else.

Harry knew the last student standing, because of a unique Quidditch move. He knew that this particular sixth year student was clever and creative. He quickly discovered that Brutus Armstrong wasn't disgracing his surname too when he was shoved to the ground forcefully. In the scuffle that ensued, Armstrong landed a couple of good punches, but Harry knew the boy's vital points, and the strong student fell down, landing across Harry.

Harry slowly stood up, recovering his breath. He looked around, but no attack came his way, and his senses confirmed that all his opponents were unconscious. He still made a show of checking that each of them was out before using the nearest student's wand to

Summon his own and removing the chameleon spell. He then raised his arms in victory.

The silence in the room changed into a massive cheer as Dumbledore removed the protection dome.

“Professor Evans wins.” he said, quite unnecessarily.

Harry awoke his opponents, and, asking for silence so that the club members could take notes, he explained the errors he had perceived in their tactics. The most obvious was the fact that they didn't revive their fallen comrades, and they could have found ways of revealing his position earlier, especially as they knew he was Disillusioned. It was harder, of course, when you didn't know that someone was there. The topic of friendly fire was also raised, and, since all the spectators knew that already, he also explained to the group how he had appeared behind his opponents.

Under the same rule than the previous contest, the five could ask for a rematch, and, after a short deliberation, they decided to go for it. Harry nodded to Dumbledore, and the protection dome was erected again. The landscape was the same, and Harry took the same position – he wanted to see how they would react now. As expected, when Dumbledore shouted for them to begin, the five students started by casting a magical shield. Harry had another idea, though, and he brought up a strong physical shield before jumping and casting an explosion curse on the ground under him at the same time. The conjured matter exploded, sending rocks everywhere and Harry in the air – a perfect "rocket jump", as some would call it. After spending half a second orienting himself, Harry landed right next to a pair of students. One was unconscious from the thrown rubble, and the other was shocked. Using his knowledge in martial arts, Harry disabled him again before Disillusioning himself and the two students' body. After a quick sweep to determine if the others were alright, he once again climbed up a tree to survey his surroundings. Halfway up, though, he felt a tug at his body and almost fell down. He circled the tree with his legs and looked towards the direction of the pull.

The three other students were there, grouped behind a ridge. They were spraying ink in the air, in every direction, and occasionally

Summoning him. He decided to play a bit and, Levitating one of the unconscious bodies below him, he directed it to them just as they were Summoning him again. He heard a shout of surprise, followed by three spells at the same time: Incarcerous, Petrificatus Totalus, and Stupefy.

Harry took advantage of their confusion and approached the ridge's edge.

"We won?" a feminine voice asked.

"We should check." another answered.

"Finite Incantatem." the third said, aiming his wand at the prone figure.

"Finite Incantatem." Harry whispered at the same time, aiming at the whole zone behind the ridge.

A short pause.

"Hey! I see you." the girl exclaimed.

"I see you too!" the second voice exclaimed.

"Shit!" the third had enough time to express.

Harry opened fire, dodging the returning spells by crouching behind the ridge edge. He rotated his choice of spells between Dispelling and Stunning spells, getting rid of their shields before sending them into unconsciousness.

He was quick, and they didn't have time to think. They could only defend, eventually falling into unconsciousness, one after the other. Brutus was the last man standing, again, but even when he revived his three friends just before being caught, they weren't in top shape and fell again.

Once again, the Great Hall cheered the winner, and Harry revived the students, before letting Madam Pomfrey fuss over the one with a gash in his forehead – indirect result of Harry's second spell. Like after the first round, he held a short debriefing session with the students. He told them that the Summoning spell was a good idea in itself, but that they shouldn't have taken his "parcel" as face money. He also told them that grouping most of their forces at the same place hadn't been the best idea, even if they were protected by the ridge. In fact, that ridge had been their downfall because, as soon as Harry was close enough, he had been able to aim over it while staying hidden.

A number of students left after the challenge, discussing animatedly about it. Once they were gone, though, Harry found that, once again, the club's membership had risen after the fight.

Like the previous time, he was approached by Flitwick as well, and the diminutive teacher asked for a demonstration match. It was quickly settled that they would do it at the beginning of the magical duelling club, two days later.

When Flitwick left, someone else approached Harry from behind.

"You held back."

Harry whirled around and looked at the voice source inquisitively, before remembering Dumbledore's introduction. "Of course, Miss Wu." he answered, bowing slightly. "I didn't want to kill them."

"Hmmhmm." the witch hummed noncommittally. After a few seconds of reflection, she seemed to reach a conclusion. "I heard Professor Flitwick, and I would like to have a go with you too. I also heard that you held a club for unarmed combat?"

"On Tuesdays, yes. Would you like to do it then?"

"Alright." she said, before bowing. "Until then."

“Until then.” Harry repeated, bowing as well, and the shorter woman left, Harry’s pensive gaze following her.

‘Stop staring at her ass!’ Tracey’s mental comment made him start.

‘I wasn’t!’ he sent back indignantly, before he felt the underlying laughter. ‘Ha! Very funny.’

‘What did she want?’

‘She just proposed that we have a fight next Tuesday. After Flitwick on Monday...’

‘...it will be a tough week.’

‘True.’ Harry finished, before speaking aloud again. “Alright, people. Since we have the Great Hall and this wonderful scenery today, I’d like two teams going at each other. Four against four, and a mix of years and level...”

Tracey smiled. Her boyfriend was in charge.

That week-end was a Hogsmeade week-end, and several students filed out of Hogwarts grounds gate towards the wizarding hamlet. Some met in Zonko’s to buy pranks and browse the other funny items. Some met in Honeyduke’s to buy sweets and chocolates. Some met in the Three Broomsticks to drink a butterbeer between friends. And some met in the Hog’s Head, meeting... their parents.

Theodore Nott and Pansy Parkinson were waiting in one of the pub’s alcoves, their hoods high and hiding their faces. Every so often, the girl would make a nervous gesture and the boy would calm her. Finally, his father came and the three of them had a chat. When the Death Eater left the pub, soon afterwards, his mind was full of uncensored information. Information that would anger a certain Dark Lord. The two teenagers waited for a few minutes afterwards, sipping their butterbeer. When they deemed it safe, they left as well.

And a particular barman headed to a room to the back, where he placed a call to his Headmaster of a brother.

Unfortunately, Nott's presence in Hogsmeade would be disproved by the fact that he was at the Ministry at the exact same time, speaking with Amelia Bones about unimportant matters for a couple of hours. In Egypt, that evening...

"Report."

Voldemort's voice was stable, and the Dark Lord was calm. But Nott knew that his news was going to cause turmoil.

"The alibi is secured." Nott's clone said. "I held Bones for half an hour."

"It is as you supposed, my Lord." the real Nott said. "Their mail has been filtered. And censored."

"DUMBLEDORE!"

The shout was loud and full of anger, and the two Notts winced, waiting for a punishment...

...which didn't come. Instead, the Dark Lord started to laugh.

Laugh?

The two Notts looked at each other, and both knew that it wasn't a good sign.

As quickly as it had appeared, Voldemort's mirth evaporated. "Dumbledore has grown a backbone?" he asked himself, starting to pace on his dais – well, slither, rather. "The old muggle-loving fool must know about the children, now, and there is no doubt that he will do something about them."

A pause.

“Nott!” he exclaimed, and the addressed man – the real one – jumped to his knees... a painful move.

“My Lord?”

“Gather each and every follower having a child at Hogwarts.” Voldemort said, not even looking at him as he paced. When Nott didn’t move immediately, Voldemort stopped pacing and stared at him. “Now!” he shouted.

The man jumped to his feet and was out of the room before realizing it – survival instincts, surely.

“It is time we bring the fight there.” Voldemort whispered, resuming his pacing. “But we’ll have to wait. Yes, we will wait. At least until Asmodai is back; he and Malfoy will be unstoppable. In the meantime... no more mails. Or better, since he reads them, I can send the old fool on a tangent. Oh yes. And we will screen the brats for tracers before they arrive. One is never careful enough...”

The Dark Lord’s voice lowered to an indistinct hissing as he made plans, continuing his slithery pacing.

Harry and his diminutive colleague had their demonstration duel the next day. With his experience in Charms, Flitwick knew more spells than Harry, but Harry was quick on his feet, and, despite using his willow wand – Henry Evans’ official wand in school – he had more raw power than his opponent. His speed allowed him to sidestep a large part of his opponent’s curses, and his magical power came handy to shield or to dispel those truly handicapping. After twenty minutes of non-stop magical fighting, the two of them nodded to each other and Disarmed their opponent at the same time. The wands flew, and, without a visible mean to cast a spell, the duel was declared a draw by the three usual judges.

Once again, the Astronomy teacher approached Harry afterwards and told him that he was holding back. Harry was quite surprised by her gall – after all, it was a demonstration match, and neither he nor Flitwick would have used truly lethal spells.

Draw or not draw, the whole duel was dissected during the following club session – the attendance of which was, unsurprisingly, larger than the previous times.

Later, in the privacy of Flitwick's office, the two of them would give each other their true comments and insights about the duel over a cup of tea.

“I think you were holding back.” Flitwick said.

Harry frowned. “Does just everyone see that I'm holding back? Of course I am! We both were, if my feeling is right.” he finished with a pointed look at the tea-sipping teacher.

Flitwick looked at him approvingly. “You're right.” he said simply.

After a few thoughtful seconds, Harry spoke again. “Does that mean that you want a rematch without spectators and barriers?”

Chuckling, the small man raised a hand. “Not at all. I don't think I'd be a match for you, then.”

“What do you mean?”

“You weren't even panting or sweating after our duel.”

“I was covered in a blue goo, my feet had been enlarged, and my robes transfigured into pyjamas. I think I had other things to think than...” Harry stopped, his mouth closing with a clomp.

“Exactly.” Flitwick said smugly. “You had other things to think than trying to appear winded.” He sipped his tea while Harry searched a way out of the situation. Flitwick defused it, though. “However, I think that most of the teachers and members of the Order of the Phoenix know how fearsome you are in battle. After all, with the way you dealt with the Express attackers, I think that no one would want to engage you in serious duelling.”

Harry nodded. "She does, though." he absently commented.

"Someone challenged you?" Flitwick asked, putting his empty cup back on the table and sitting up with an interested expression. "She?"

"Mei Wu, our new colleague. She seems to think I voluntarily flaunt my skill while it's exactly the contrary!" Harry exclaimed, before remembering who he was talking to. Backtracking on his words, he was relieved not to have dropped more hints than necessary.

Flitwick was frowning, though. "And she has challenged you." he said, stroking his chin pensively. "Interesting..."

Harry snorted. "Interesting, right. I wonder if she will push me too far."

"Whatever the case, we will see tomorrow."

Harry nodded, and Flitwick oriented the dialog towards his area of expertise. For a solid hour, the two of them discussed about Charms, Harry balancing Flitwick's academic input by asking real-life questions taken from his own experiences.

The next day, Harry was a little nervous when came the time of his encounter with Mei Wu. Once again, the Great Hall was reserved for him and his club, and numerous additional students came to witness the event. Since it was about fighting muggle-style, they were less than with his exhibition duel with Flitwick, but, including the club members, there was still half the school there, and he was starting to get nervous about it.

Nervous? Him?

Remembering who he was, he calmed himself and chuckled internally. True, to him and in the domain of martial arts, the woman was an "unknown quantity" – Dumbledore's words concerning him, not so far ago. However, he had grappled with evil wizards and demons, and he had nothing to be ashamed of.

Five minutes before the scheduled time, his adversary entered the Great Hall. Her petite figure was clad a yellow robe with a burgundy

toga over it, and she had determined expression about her. After giving her wand to Dumbledore, she stepped on the platform's opposing side from him. Harry explained the rules to the spectators and, after they bowed to each other, Dumbledore told them to begin.

It was truly strange, because none of them moved for several seconds, each waiting for the other to open fire. And even after that, they didn't hurry into it: the two of them walked until they were two yards away from each other.

And then it began.

Mei started the attack, lunging forward and sending an impressive combination of a dozen punches, slashes, jabs, kicks, and sweeps one after the other. And Harry deflected them all, moving the attacking limbs away before they gathered enough speed to break a bone – almost as if picking a feather from thin air and throwing it away casually. When she tried a particularly vicious roundhouse kick aimed at his chest, it was slowed by her outfit. Harry was able to grab her leg and, using her momentum, he threw her in the air. Without a sound, she twisted her body gracefully and landed in a crouch, from which she slowly stood up again.

The whole attack hadn't lasted more than five seconds, and the spectators were aghast at the two fighters' skill. Neither of them was sweating, though, and the woman smiled.

“Good.” she said, before turning her back on him and walking to the platform's edge. There, she removed her toga and robe. Underneath the yellow garment, she was wearing an orange outfit that Harry remembered very well, having spent two months in a place where everybody wore it. She then smiled to him, and he smiled back. Contrarily to what most of the onlookers thought, the woman's first attack wasn't her best and he knew it. On top of that, he suspected that she possessed some fighting abilities he didn't know about yet. Not wanting to take risks at that particular moment, he applied Goken's no-mind technique and absently heard Dumbledore gasp.

The woman tilted her head to the side, and Harry felt her amusement at his lack of expression before she did the same. And, at the same

time, the two of them fell back into their chosen fighting stances. His was the Dragon, allowing him a good posture to grab her attacks away, and emphasizing his peace of mind. Hers was the aggressive one, finger outstretched into claws ready to slash at him, and, just as she lunged at him again, he recognized it. It was the Tiger.

Once again, Harry found himself the target of the woman's attacks, but she was swifter than before, and he couldn't predict her attacks. He still was able to defend quite efficiently, but found that he was going to have a major problem.

She was a woman.

In all his years of running, training, and fighting, he had never really raised a hand on members of the "fair sex" and he was having trouble starting now. Apparently, Mei seemed to have sensed his hesitation because she suddenly stopped fighting and, after retreating a few steps, she looked at him annoyingly.

"Will you please start fighting?" she asked, causing Harry to drop his control and blush wildly. Several spectators gasped at the implication that, even with the skill he displayed, their Defence teacher was not attacking.

'I have to think of her as though she was a man.' Harry thought, and he focused on that thought, allowing it to encircle the vision centre in his brain. With the focus he was able to manage, it was successful and, after opening the eyes he hadn't been aware of closing, he was now seeing just another male Shaolin monk in his everyday outfit.

He nodded, and, his expression blank again, he retook his stance. Once again, the woman lunged at him, but Harry was free from whatever scruples or second thoughts he had had before, and he counter-attacked the woman's first slash by grabbing her arm, pulling her towards him, and using her momentum to throw her to the floor. He gave her half a second to wash the shock off of her and stand up before attacking again. This time, the Dragon pounced at her from above: Harry jumped on her, and, despite allowing her defensive slash to strike home, he knew that gravity was on his side and he

struck the side of her head and her chest, dropping her to the ground again.

Despite needing a bit more time to recover, Mei wasn't unconscious yet, and she collected her wits while Harry was getting rid of his damaged vest – slashes from a martial arts champion in Tiger style could rip through all kinds of soft matters, and the woman was such a martial arts champion. Harry's bared torso earned him appreciative whistles from a part of the older girls in attendance, but he was focused on the fight, now, and leaped at the woman as soon as she was upright.

To his surprise, though, she easily avoided his attack and struck him from an unexpected angle: from behind. He was barely analysing what she had done when she retaliated, slamming her foot on his own and using it as a prop to jump and slam her forehead in his nose.

Ouch.

Despite being focused on the fight and despite having strengthened his skin after the woman's last counter-attack, Harry distinctively felt that these two attacks had struck home. Holding his bloodied nose, he looked at the woman who was standing a few yards from him.

He was almost in full battle mode by now, and, while observing his opponent carefully, he almost unconsciously healed his foot, stopped his nose from bleeding, and disconnected his pain receptors.

She was using fighting styles and stances he didn't know, and they didn't even seem to be logical in their succession of attitudes. It was as if he was watching a drunken monkey! Two thwarted attacks later, he realized that the "drunken monkey" form was indeed efficient, removing all predictability from the opponent practising it. On top of that, some of the moves made the crowd laugh, especially when Mei downed him with a vicious grapple and hopped on his back like a victorious orang-utan.

After a couple minutes, Harry had stopped using a kung fu style at all. He had gradually updated his fighting style to try to match Mei's and was still barely reaching her. His mind was set up on the challenge of

beating her by using martial arts only, and, thankfully for her, it was the only reason why he hadn't tried to use magic or even slow time. Nevertheless, his attacks were downright dangerous, by now, and Mei never placed a retaliatory strike anymore, concentrated as she was on avoiding his. She wasn't even blocking at all, her nimble form an invaluable asset for her fighting style.

Harry's friends had noticed his unusual stance, and Tracey grasped her pendant, trying to send him calming thoughts. However, he was ensconced in his fight, his mind hidden behind the no-mind technique, and she failed to reach him.

Dumbledore had noticed that the fight was getting out of hands as well, and, after a few words with Flamel and Flitwick, he decided to declare the fight a draw.

The two fighters were continuing their lethal dance, and, just as the old Headmaster stood to make his judgement known, Harry's downward punch missed Mei by a hair's breadth and his hardened fist crashed on the floor. For the second time in his life, Harry's fist broke into stone tile, and most of the people in the attendance gasped – again.

The impact made Harry realize the current situation, and he slowly stood up. Having noticed that Harry had stopped moving, Mei stopped her drunkenly moves as well.

As Dumbledore was pronouncing the tie, Harry's mind returned to his normal state, only to be "assaulted" by Tracey's frantic calls. He calmed her, and noticed that Mei had approached him.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I was too far into it."

"It's alright," she answered, and, low enough so that it wouldn't be heard by anyone except him, she added "I have things to tell you. Tonight at ten, my quarters."

Harry nodded, before transfiguring his damaged vest into proper robes and sliding them over his head. After a quick check-up by

Madam Pomfrey – and a couple Potions, too – the two fighters were allowed to return to their regular activities, Harry's being heading the unarmed fighting club.

To say that his students were attentive today would be an understatement.

That night, while Harry was entertaining his friends in his own quarters, a future version of himself knocked at the door leading to the Chinese woman's quarters. Several seconds later, the door opened by itself, and Harry entered an austere room. He noticed that the yellow robe and the dark red toga were hung near the door, and, with the room's lack of decoration and the memory of the orange outfit Mei had fought in, it made him remember a particular temple again. A monastery where he had spent a whole summer. The Shaolin Monastery near Zheng Zhou.

"Good evening, young man." the woman's voice came from his right, surprising him. He whirled around and bowed respectfully. Anyone able to hold one's ground against him deserved to be respected in one way or another – even if he had no doubt that, should magic be allowed, he would have won fair and square.

"Good evening to you too." he answered, before registering that she hadn't spoken in English but in Chinese. "You wanted to tell me... things?"

She nodded. "Dumbledore visited some members of our magical government, a couple years ago." she said, switching back to English. "And they deemed useful to have someone trustful in his school. The opportunity arose and I took it." She looked at him appraisingly. "And I will definitely tell my friend Xiang-Yun that her prediction had been correct, as usual."

Harry didn't have to read the woman's mind to have a faint inkling about the direction the conversation was heading to, and he didn't like it. Incidentally, if he had had to read her mind, it would have proven difficult as well: his peripheral Legilimency had long since told him that this particular woman had a strong control over her own

mind. Enough to be called Master Occlumens by the British wizards and witches. Harry had already broken through stronger defences, but that had been an enemy's – Snape's – and he wasn't ready to force his way in her mind here and now. He used regular conversation instead.

"You were sent by the Chinese magical government? Why?" he asked suspiciously. "And who are you, exactly?"

"Don't you remember me, Mr. Tao?" she asked innocently.

"Mr. Tao?" Harry asked, trying to recognize the word with his relatively small knowledge of Chinese. When he remembered that that particular word meant "potter", he paled suddenly. "How... how do you know?"

"As I said, our government found Mr. Dumbledore's insistence at discovering your whereabouts suspicious. We didn't know where you went after France, but we knew that there was a high probability for you to be at Hogwarts. Either because Dumbledore would have dragged you there, or under your own steam. When I noticed your fighting style, I remembered the young boy who destroyed a centuries old stone in the middle of a particular courtyard." A pause. "And you did it again today. I'm sorry to have pushed you that far, by the way."

He bowed again, indicating that he accepted her apology fully.

She smiled. "And, as to who I am... I am the one who led the Shaolin Monastery's international relationships when you spent a summer there. I was in the tournament's jury, too."

"Still... Sifu... I'm not... I mean... I could have been anyone else." Harry argued weakly.

Mei looked at him shrewdly. "I know. But you just admitted it yourself, didn't you?"

Harry put his head in his hands and groaned. After a few seconds, he looked up again. "You're aware that some people would kill for that piece of information, aren't you?"

She nodded seriously. "I am. But you know how difficult I can be."

"Yes. I kind of realized it today." Harry said, and they smiled, both of them remembering the fight earlier.

A pause ensued, broken only by the Astronomy teacher. "You have never practised outside our monastery." she said, and it wasn't a question.

Harry blushed slightly. "I didn't." he admitted. "I don't even know how you call the style you used... you looked as though you were a... drunken monkey. No offence intended, of course."

"None taken. And you're right."

"About what?"

"It was the monkey form mixed with the drunken style."

A pause.

"It was... effective." Harry commented. "And, thinking about it, I now understand your name better. Quick fist, indeed." he added, thinking of Mei's nickname.

A curious sound came from the woman in front of him. It was laughter, but, coming out of the small woman in front of him, it was light and natural, resembling water flowing down the stream of a mountain river. A couple seconds later, she was smiling when she spoke again. "In case you were wondering, I got that nickname mere days after being born."

"A predestined path, then."

“Don’t joke about Fate with a Chinese.” she admonished good-naturedly, before smiling again. “Would you like to learn?”

It took him a second or two to understand that she was speaking about her style of fighting, but he acquiesced vigorously, and the two of them easily prepared a schedule. After all, as Astronomy teacher, she had most of her days free, and he had all the time he wanted.

To be continued in next chapter: Enlightening Holidays...

New weapons to learn a style,
Fights to fight, friendly and not.
He is just building his style
To return, ready and hot.

Chapter 32 – Enlightening Holidays

posted April 2nd, 2006

When came the moment of getting the names of students staying in the castle, Dumbledore asked for the Order of the Phoenix to convene, and he spoke to them thusly:

“Because the circumstances compelled us to, we have been monitoring the students’ mail for the last few months. And, in a few cases, we have been forced to modify the content of these letters. We now have the certainty that several students have been more or less under the Dark Lord’s influence, despite the numerous hints I gave them to abandon that direction.”

These few sentences caused chaos to erupt in the cramped office, as several members had children in Hogwarts, the Weasleys being the most vocal about it. Dumbledore raised his hands to reclaim silence.

“As you know, Christmas holidays are coming up, and these students will come home. I have no doubt that our... censorship... will be uncovered. I wanted your ideas on how we could straighten the situation up, and pull it to our advantage if possible.”

Such an open question was deemed to yield few results at first, and chaotic input afterwards, and it did just that. Dumbledore nodded to McGonagall, though, and she set up a Quick-Notes Quill to write everyone’s words.

“I say they stay here.” Moody growled. “Or better yet, we take them into custody. If you say you have proof, that’s fine with me.”

“They are but children!” someone exclaimed from the back of the room. “They are victims, and they haven’t done anything bad.”

“I don’t want my children around Death Eaters in training!” Molly Weasley exclaimed towards the previous speaker. “Especially after You-Know-Who updates their orders and they start to kill... or worse!”

“We could simply monitor them.” Kingsley said pensively. “Tracking charms, listening charms... we could then find out where the Dark Lord hides his ugly face.”

“Who are they, by the way?” Remus asked.

Dumbledore looked around, visibly uneasy about disclosing that particular information.

“It’s not like we can’t guess!” Sirius snorted. “Let’s see... Most of the children of Death Eaters we know from the first war are in Slytherin. Malfoy, Parkinson, Nott, Flint...”

“I have to remind you that there are many Slytherin students who do not follow Voldemort.” Dumbledore said gravely. “We can’t prejudge about anyone’s loyalties. It would be disastrous to make the whole house go to him because they are shunned by the others.”

Sirius snorted, but Remus prevented him from starting a counterproductive rant about a particular Slytherin spy-turned-traitor.

Harry had tuned everyone out. When Kingsley had spoken about tracking charms, it had given him an idea that he was expanding in the privacy of his own mind. Dumbledore noticed that he wasn’t even reacting to the remaining Marauders’ antics, and he addressed him.

“Henry, do you have an idea?”

The addressed teenager-appearing-adult raised his head and looked around. He then shook his head, mentally conveying his feeling that his idea would better be discussed in private. The Headmaster caught the underlying meaning and nodded. An hour afterwards, the remaining topics were exhausted and the Order members filed out through the Floo. When Sirius and Remus noticed that Harry hadn’t moved from his pensive stance, they stayed behind as well, despite McGonagall’s frown.

“Henry?” Dumbledore asked, his eyes darting towards McGonagall. ‘She might be better knowing about you. Otherwise, I’d have to dismiss her before hearing you. And she’d be mightily annoyed.’

Harry snorted as the image of a "mightily annoyed" McGonagall was sent along, but he nodded once and focused on the stern Transfiguration teacher’s mind. She had some mental defences, but, as they were, it wasn’t enough to keep his secret from prying minds. “I’m willing to tell you a secret, Professor McGonagall, but I will have to upgrade your mind defences first. Otherwise, I’d have to ask you to leave.”

“ Please, Henry, it’s Minerva among us. And you hooked my curiosity, now. What is it about?”

“I’ll create a safe box in your mind, where I will put my secret. You will then know about it, but you’ll be unable to discuss about it without me there. And it will be unreachable even by Legilimency.”

A short pause.

“That’s quite a feat.” she said, impressed.

“Remus and Sirius know about it already. And Albus can attest that that particular memory is thoroughly protected.”

She seemed to think about it before reaching a conclusion. “Very well, then. Go ahead.”

Another pause, slightly longer – by now, Harry was quite proficient in creating those boxes.

“When are you going to do it?” she asked when she noticed that he sat back comfortably.

He smiled. “It’s done.”

“What? You didn’t say anything.”

“Look at me and tell me my name.”

She looked in his eyes. “You’re... Harry... oh Merlin!”

She was gaping, by now, her mind grasping the truth for the first time. The others smiled. “Not quite.” Sirius said. “It’s not Harry O’Merlin.”

“Even if, with his power, he might be a descendent of said wizard.” Remus added.

“Mr Potter?” she asked weakly.

“Yes, Professor McGonagall?” Harry shot back.

“You are... you are so... grown up!” she exclaimed, trying to look past the adult body.

He smiled. “You already know why.” he merely said, pointing at her forehead.

While she sat back, sorting the new set of memories, Dumbledore sat up and joined his hands over his desk. “I believe you had an idea about our wayward students, Harry.”

“I might.” Harry answered, returning to his pensive state. “Some time ago, I have developed a mind virus, which works in the same way the DDoS Trojans do – at least in the propagation phase.” He looked up but only found incomprehension in the faces around him. He thought about his sentence and chuckled. “Sorry about that. My brother introduced me to computers – a muggle contraption Arthur Weasley would have a field day with – and I couldn’t stop the analogy. Let’s just say that it is a parasitic being that can jump from one mind to another upon certain conditions, and I was thinking of using the Dark Mark as such a condition.”

“Damn, Harry, it sounds like it was possible to actually infiltrate the whole Death Eaters in one go.” Sirius said.

Harry sent him a pointed look, meaning "that's the idea", and the man gasped.

"What would the parasite do?" asked Dumbledore.

Harry smiled. "Whatever we want." he started, before turning serious. "Of course, the simpler the task, the easier it will spread without risking detection. Right now, I was thinking about making the Death Eaters more susceptible to our suggestions or preventing them from killing anyone, but the latter will certainly draw Voldemort's attention and he could very well find the parasite. I also thought about a beacon of sorts."

"A beacon?"

"Yes. I know he's hiding somewhere in Egypt, but it is under a very strong Fidelius-like charm. I have been travelling back and forth for a few weeks, and-

"When?" Sirius blurted, and Harry was sure that McGonagall would have done the same thing, were she not displaying more decorum. To answer them, he simply showed them the silver hourglass that rested under his robes.

"I haven't found anything yet," he continued his explanation while stowing the item back in its place, "but, with a mind parasite calling to me and drawing me to them, I have more chance to get them."

"Why do you have to?" McGonagall asked. "You risk finding yourself facing... Him."

Harry smirked, and the others thought that it was a grimace that didn't belong to him. It was more a soldier's.

"That's the idea." he said.

"What?"

“Harry.” Dumbledore scolded him gently. “I’m not sure that it’s wise to-”

“It is.” Harry said, before turning silent. A couple of seconds later, three gasps could be heard in the room as Sirius, Remus, and McGonagall received a particular memory relative to a Prophecy, right next to his other secrets. “As I wanted to say, I have to. Besides, I have met him already, and I think I have my chances.”

“We will be there anyway, Harry.” Dumbledore said. Seeing him frown, he added “We can help you.”

The addressed teen seemed to think about it, before he nodded. “Can I have a list of those students? It will take some time to prepare the appropriate virus and to infect them with it discreetly.”

Dumbledore acquiesced, and thought about them outside of his mental shields.

Harry caught the thoughts easily and he smiled. “Thank you.”

Sirius looked at Remus. “It’s creepy when they do that.”

“Come on, Padfoot.” Remus replied, smiling at his friend condescendingly – in a friendly you-are-such-a-wimp way. “Let’s go home.”

Sirius looked at his friend in wonder, before snorting. “Riiight. Why don’t you tell our friends here the reason why you are in such a hurry?”

“I don’t have to.” the ex-werewolf answered. “I’m sure two of them can get it from my mind.”

“I don’t do that anymore.” Harry countered. “Only when you mentally yell “Tonks” am I able to get it.” He smiled. “Oops?”

Remus blushed, but laughed it off, and the two Marauders left the office, leaving three smiling teachers. Harry quickly bade his farewells

to the two others and returned to his quarters to prepare his mental parasite.

Since he was teaching, he was able to meet each student at least twice before Christmas break, and he infiltrated their mind with the carefully prepared virus. It was dormant in them, but it would jump to any person the student thought of as a Death Eater. If said person was really a Death Eater, on top of continuing to spread, the virus would start its real work.

After a bit of work with Dumbledore, Harry had decided to skip the gullibility part out because it was too conspicuous. The virus would only give them a compulsion to breathe fresh air. When outside, their mind would call to him until he found them. He made it so that the call would only be made outside and without Voldemort or Snape around, so that the Dark Lord's senses wouldn't pick it.

All in all, it was small enough to stay inconspicuous, and it gave him a better chance to locate their base. He still kept the obedience virus prepared somewhere in his mind, ready to launch it to control a group of enemies.

Two weeks later...

It was time for the students who didn't stay at Hogwarts to take the train back to London, and Harry decided to make the trip with his friends. They discussed about the holidays and, as they couldn't see each other because of travelling plans from each family, they vowed to send gifts to each other. As they were nearing London, Harry excused himself and, after deciding with Tracey that she'd wait for him on the platform, he disappeared. Planting a virus in the students' mind was something, but he wanted to be sure that it was working.

He approached the tight group of Slytherins where Malfoy, Nott, and Parkinson were the prominent figures, and followed them. As soon as they met an adult – it was Nott Sr. –, Harry entered his mind and he was satisfied to notice his own virus irrupting there, pass the low defences, and graft itself on his conscience building. After a minute, there was no visible trace of the intrusion. At the same time, Harry felt the man's mind calling to him. It was strong but he knew that it was

because of his proximity with him. As he was exiting Nott's mind, he heard someone say "Activate!" and the call stopped altogether. Harry noticed that the whole group had disappeared – by portkey, surely – and, if he concentrated enough, he could still hear the call, although barely so. It was coming from the north, but stopped after a few seconds. Apparently, the little group had entered some building.

After morphing into the shape of Tracey's guardian, he joined her, and, after saying their good-byes to their friends, the two of them disappeared, heading towards Japan.

Harry was right: the little group had entered "some" building. Namely, Riddle's manor in the hamlet of Little Hangleton. The wards around Voldemort's main hideout in England were as strong as ever, and the students, unmarked as they were, felt ill for the duration of their stay. Thankfully, the stay wasn't long. After entering the house proper, greeting the guards on the way, they briefly stopped in a room where Nott searched and dispelled any and all tracking spell on them and on their stuff – they had two on them and two on their trunks. They then headed towards the portal and found themselves in the familiar entrance room of Wadjet's temple in Egypt.

Since Voldemort was actually waiting for them, the traps there were deactivated, and, one after the other, they put their hand on the Eye of Ra and disappeared, only to reappear in the temple proper, a hundred yards below.

After another pause to settle down and collect their wits, they were led to the Dark Lord. Over the next two hours, Voldemort grilled them on their findings in Hogwarts. When Pansy spoke about their Defence teacher, innocently mentioning his metal arm, he almost killed her – his massive tail missing her by a mere foot, and the displaced air sending her reeling backwards anyway.

"Do you mean to say," he hissed angrily, "that our main enemy had been in Hogwarts all that time?"

"I... I don't know... my Lord." she stuttered, tears not far away. "We... We didn't know... that he was... that... I mean... an enemy."

“Shut up!” he yelled, and she obeyed.

“We reported it already, my Lord.” Theodore Nott said, his usual arrogance transformed into meekness in front of his formidable lord. “It was in our... letters.”

“As you might know, your mail has been screened by the old fool.” Voldemort said. “So, from now on, you won’t send anything compromising by that way, and you won’t be contacted in that manner either. Jugson found a spell that can send something you write onto another’s parchment. You will learn it and use it once at school. Now leave.” Voldemort finished, noticing that Snape – or whatever the name of the Summoned person was – was exiting his quarters, heading towards him.

The ex-Potion Master always had strange ideas, but most of them were interesting, and he didn’t want Dumbledore to retrieve these ideas from the mind of the youngsters. ‘If the old fool is up to mail censorship,’ he thought, ‘he isn’t far from doing exactly that.’ Japan, at the same time...

The two teenagers were welcomed warmly, and they barely had time to settle down before being invited to a late supper where school stories were exchanged freely.

After a good night of rest and the ensuing breakfast, Tracey decided to join Petunia and Ulrike and the three of them spent the day shopping. Thanks to his Time Turner, Harry had already taken care of his gifts – which were safely stowed in his trunk – and he decided to pay a visit to his digital alter ego.

Copycat was quite bored, in fact. Despite the fact that the network was growing, there hadn’t been anything really new about it, and he was quite tired to explore the private life and works of so many individuals. And the increasingly numerous porn sites weren’t funny anymore. That’s why he was so interested when Harry told him about his own experiences. Seeing Copycat in that state, Harry resolved to find a way to bring a computer in Hogwarts.

And he abided with it, having numerous discussions with Jorg and his increasingly knowledgeable cousin James about the nature of electricity, magnetism, and electronics. He also looked up several encyclopaedias about these topics, and, strangely enough, about history.

It appeared that, historically, magnetism had been discovered as a muggle science approximately at the same time as wizards and witches had completely separated from muggles. After several tests, Harry discovered that magical effects often involved electricity and magnetism.

And he understood why highly magical places were so chaotic regarding electronic devices. Compasses and other magnetic devices went haywire as well, like they would around a powerful hi-fi audio system or power line. Simple electrical items could work, but not for long. Complex devices, involving electronic bits prone to failure because of magnetism, wouldn't work at all.

And it was James who made the remark that such external influence on electronics could be paralleled with cosmic rays, and that shielding existed for computers to work in space.

The few days before Christmas passed quickly and Harry and James were soon forced to stop their discussions because of the large pile of presents in the lounge.

In the midst of other presents from his family and friends – among whom were Alison and Josh – Harry found himself with a gift certificate at the local electronics store, and his eyes lit up when he showed it to Jorg and James, thanking them for it.

From Tracey, he got a wizard genealogy book, listing the prominent family lines of the British wizarding world. Of course, the Potter being such a family, he found himself quite easily, and Alison wasn't far from him, being first cousin once removed. He turned the pages and found the Weasleys as well, the current generation needing a couple of pages for them. It wasn't charmed to update itself automatically,

but the last pages gave the publisher's address, with the hint that additional pages or update charms could be ordered for a modest fee.

Harry got her a bracer with several charms on it: three were for defence, one was for enhanced senses, and the last two acted as small containers.

The two of them got the usual paraphernalia from their friends: a jumper from Molly Weasley, a bag of sweets from Ron and the twins, and a book from Hermione. They had sent their own gifts to the red-haired family as well: gift certificates for the adults, muggle sweets for Ron, the Trapped Book of Traps for the twins, and a book on famous muggle-born wizards and witches for Hermione.

Maureen, being the last to dig for a present, found a heavy envelope lying face down at the foot of the tree. "It's for you." she said to Harry, giving him the parchment-made item.

Harry looked at it questioningly, not recognizing the writing. It scanned it for spells, but nothing came up. With everyone now suspicious of the letter and watching him attentively, he opened and read it.

Apprentice,

Now that the staff is settled as yours, you have to visit so that I can give you some advices about its use. Be at Hogwarts tomorrow at noon.

"It's from Flamel." he whispered. Truth be told, he hadn't realized that it was already a year since he had poured his magic into his katana, defining the now-transfigured weapon as his main magical focus. Over the months, he had remarked that he had more powerful results with his staff-turned-ring than any other wand, eventually overstepping Merlin's wand. And he had a better control, too. Was there something else to know?

He shrugged. "I have to meet him tomorrow at noon. I suppose it's England local time, so I have some time before then."

In the meantime, Harry spent some more time with Jorg and James, testing magic against old computers and trying to come up with a shield against the disturbances. After many tries, he finally found such a shield when he tried the anti-Apparation ward, but it raised other problems, the first of which being the transport: how could he Apparate with something when the thing was inside an anti-Apparation ward?

The second problem was the power needed for the computer to work: even if he could shield them, it wouldn't be practicable to bring power lines to Hogwarts. James then made a remark about the fact that magic effects contained electricity, and Harry almost slapped himself. He dutifully wrote the remark down before readying himself for his trip to England. While he was changing, he noticed that Tracey was putting her own jacket on.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"With you." she answered. "Since the beginning of the vacation, we haven't spent five minutes together. It is already difficult to be together when you are a teacher at school, and I thought we would make use of these holidays to be with each other. Am I not allowed to see my boyfriend?"

Harry had blushed. "I'm sorry. I had all those ideas... I guess I could have turned back time to spend more of it with you." he said, before looking at her with a shrewd expression. "Tell you what: we'll turn back 24 hours as soon as we arrive, and then we'll spend the whole day together. Is it alright?"

Her own eyes shone and she nodded vigorously.

He did as they had agreed, and they spent the next (previous) 24 hours together, visiting the parks around London, buying sweets for each other, spending time at the movies, having a mock-fight with snow and generally acting like the loving teenagers they were.

When the time came, the two of them were sitting next to a roaring fire in his quarters. Flamel entered the apartment and smiled when he

noticed Tracey dozing on Harry's shoulder – he hadn't seen him in his adolescent shape yet, but Harry's mental presence was enough for the old man to recognize his apprentice.

"We are to see Merlin." he said softly. "I'm sorry, but she can't accompany you."

Harry nodded, and he settled her on the sofa. She whimpered but stayed asleep. The snowball fight they had had earlier had worn her out.

"Remove everything magical except your staff." Flamel instructed, and Harry complied, emptying everything in a drawer. Since he was on vacation, Harry had re-grown his normal left arm before leaving Hogwarts, and his metallic one was waiting in another of his locked cupboards.

"It reminds me..." Harry started. "You said I was going to see him earlier, didn't you?"

"I did, but we didn't have much time. Now, however, he spoke about meeting you. With your staff." Flamel finished with a pointed look at Harry's ring.

Harry understood, and he transfigured the ring into a walking staff. "I'm ready." he then said.

Flamel nodded and took a badge from his pocket. Understanding that it was a portkey, Harry looked around to see if he hadn't forgotten anything. Seeing Tracey's sleeping form, he thought about giving her a simple message about his whereabouts and merely aimed his staff towards the low table facing the sofa. A glass of water was instantly transfigured into a parchment with a message for his girlfriend. The parchment was very beautiful and sturdy and sported a golden border, and his message was written in a nice calligraphic alphabet, with coloured fillings and an accompanying picture. A picture of a kiss between two characters looking very much like Harry and Tracey.

Harry looked between his staff and the parchment in wonder for a few seconds. "I just wanted to leave a message." he mumbled.

"Things like that happen when you change from a weak focus to a strong one abruptly."

Harry nodded, and turned back to the Alchemist. The two of them touched the portkey, and, after the old man activated it, they felt the pull on their navel as they were thrown through space.

A short time later, the two wizards found themselves outside, and Flamel led the way towards a concealed cave. Once inside, Harry noticed that the wall opposite to the entrance was different from the hewn rock around him. Said wall resembled alabaster and was shining with a pulsating inner glow, which illuminated the cave softly. Several runes could be seen around the "opening" although several of them were faded from the time passed since the wizard's imprisonment.

"This is Merlin's prison." Flamel whispered. "Stay quiet." he added unnecessarily, before turning and approaching the closed opening. The old alchemist held a tentative arm forward, before pressing his hand on the whitish material. A rasping voice rose then, although it was not louder than a whisper, and the surrounding glow intensified.

"...flower saves... Hacker convicted... Simpson tried twice... Riddle seeks Apocalypse... Norwich burns... Zeus attracts Shoemaker and Levy... Brazil wins..."

Flamel removed his hand, panting, and Harry went to his side, but the old man lifted his other hand to stop him. "Explanations later. Your turn." he said, pointing at the smooth wall.

Harry looked up, unsure, but his resolve strengthened. He frowned and stood up, and, like his mentor, he put his left hand on the wall of Merlin's jail, his right hand holding his staff. The effect was immediate, and he felt a draw on his magic. The voice rose again, seeming younger somehow.

“...ace knows and joins as the mask is lifted... Minions of the snake fight those of the saviour... Hunted redheads hunt the sevenths but find only six... Dawn ends the snakes’ fight and peace reigns again... Secrecy rules and prevents swift changes but not resentment... Threats applied, depression and counsel, redistribution of power...” A pause. “I AM FREE!” the voice yelled, conveying a feeling of long-awaited freedom so intense that Harry recoiled in shock. His hand removed from the barrier, the voice disappeared again. The cave, which had been illuminated brightly for a short moment, returned to the dull ambient glow.

Flamel shaking his shoulder brought Harry out of his trance, and he followed the old man outside.

“Are you alright?” was the first question. “Are you completely drained, magically?”

Harry nodded, then, after checking his magic reserves, he shook his head. He opened his mouth to ask a question but the alchemist beat him to it.

“Can you feel your staff?”

Harry expanded his senses towards his arms and beyond, and, noticing the faint hum in the staff’s magic, he acquiesced again.

“What is the meaning of all this?” he asked.

“As I told you before, Merlin is now barely alive, a consciousness branched on the magic currents passing through the planet, and he can extract probable predictions about the future. From past experience, it seems that, the more power we feed him with, the more accurate the predictions are. And, the younger the giver is, the farthest the predictions are. Conversely, like all Divination methods, there is little sense that can be extracted from these bits, especially out of context. But, what intrigues me the most is the last thing he said. He started saying this only recently, and, strangely, he would stop at that even if I stay glued to the wall.”

“Is this the limit to his predictions?” Harry asked. “His freedom?”

“I would suppose so, if his freedom was found in death.” was Flamel’s answer. “After all, Seers seldom See after their own demise.”

Harry pondered this and the hints about the future uncovered by Merlin, and he suddenly rose to enter the cave once more.

“What are you doing?” Flamel asked, grasping his arm with a surprisingly quick move for such an old man.

“I’m going to do it again. He said something about Riddle and Apocalypse, and it must concern Voldemort.”

“He won’t give you any more advice today, Harry. He has to rest for a while before being able to give another oracle. Besides, he won’t explain anything, only giving you more things to chew.”

Harry relented, and looked at his staff. “What’s about this, then?”

“Your staff acquired a bit of power from him. I can’t tell you which kind, because it had been different for each of us. Mine got a knack for defence, for which I had close to no knowledge. However, before you start using yours, we should move to a safe environment for you to try it.”

And, after Apparating to a deserted place, they did just that. And Harry noticed that, like his mentor before him, the staff supplemented one of his weaknesses: with it, he was now able to conjure things with better control. It wasn’t on par with his ability in Transfiguration yet, but he knew that, with time, he could reach that level.

Before leaving Britain, Harry made a stop at Diagon Alley. At Gringotts, he withdrew enough Galleons to have a converted sum of a couple thousands pounds – which he thought was enough for his computer spending. At Flourish and Blotts, he found three books about Muggle inventions, two of which including recent ones. One of them, obviously written by an arrogant pureblood, described them with disparaging terms, and Harry bought the other one.

Once in Japan and his Pounds converted into Yens, he used some of his money and his Christmas gift certificate to buy a laptop computer at the local store. He then made several attempts trying to find a way to magically recharge the computer's battery. The first dozen tries were quite unsuccessful, and, in some cases, downright dangerous. Of course, after the first overload-related explosions, Harry shielded the room heavily so that no harm could befall him or his extended family.

He also found himself more and more at the electronics store, where the clerk felt it was funny to ask if he simply ate the spare batteries he bought. Harry simply acquiesced, before laughing at the clerk's stunned look.

As the holidays progressed, and while he was working on the batteries problem, Harry began to think about the third problem: the internet connection. It was Copycat who found the answer to this, citing the communication satellites hovering over Europe since 20 years ago. Harry had known about these satellites before, but Copycat's help was invaluable to get the European satellites location and accepted protocols. Indulging in a last splurge, Harry spent a quite a wad of money to acquire a top-of-the-range Inmarsat satellite phone and all the necessary connection equipment including a modulator/demodulator system with a stunningly high speed of 9600 bps – it was six times slower than Genevieve's 56K modem, but it was the most advanced equipment available to non-military individuals for that purpose.

With a bit of magic to smooth it all, Harry, James, and Jorg finally succeeded in creating a self-sufficient computer with which they were able to chat with Copycat – of course, the laptop contained several useful programs as well. Having tested the computer's shielding against magic already – by heavily warding a storage space and storing the thing there –, Harry concluded the experiment by repeating the action with the whole thing.

Murphy's Law showed that it was a universal law by providing... exceptions: the computer worked perfectly, even functioning inside the magic-heavy atmosphere.

The satellite connection was another story, though, and it wasn't going to function inside Hogwarts' wards. Harry was proficient in escaping these wards, though, and he could always find a deserted clearing in the Forbidden Forest or a secluded spot around the lake to settle his computer.

Harry had learnt his lesson in young romance, and devoted part of his holidays to Tracey. With the Time Turner, it was quite easy, and the two of them even used the artefact together to spend a couple of days of fun in some part of the world or some other.

After Harry went to see Goken alone a few times over the vacation, the two of them also went to the dojo together, and the martial arts teacher decided that it was his duty to instruct Tracey too, while Harry looked. The girl didn't have half of Harry's powers, though, and Goken started slowly. Noticing this, Harry decided to surprise both of them – while playing a prank on the man – by transferring his martial training to Tracey. That decision brought the two of them in Newcastle, one of Tracey's homes in England, for an intensive memory sharing and mind reorganization session. Harry showed Tracey how to enter her own mind, and, under her mental eye, he organized and protected her mind with the same defences than his own. Once organized, it was easy to copy the weapon proficiencies he had learnt.

This, of course, didn't go well without a bottle of aspirin.

They repeated the same day again and again afterwards, using her other houses to live in and re-train her body with her new mental reflexes.

And, the "next" day, Goken saw himself showered with unexpected blows which disrupted his concentration completely. His defence askew, he relented and declared a grinning Tracey the winner. After the customary celebration for the new year, everybody slept late. It was Tracey who woke the house by entering Harry's room in a hurry.

“Harry!” she exclaimed. “We must pack! The Hogwarts Express!”

“Mmmmtmmrmm.” was the boy’s mumbled reply.

“What was that?” she asked, his travel bag in a hand and her wand in the other.

“Leaves t’morrow.” he replied, clearly not fully awakened yet. “C’m’ere.”

“But the time difference...” she said, her face scrunching in calculation while she sat on the side of his bed.

“It’s plus eight for us.” he finished, before grabbing her and kissing her soundly on the lips.

Her computation disrupted, she relented in the kiss for a few seconds, before pushing him away, disgust etched on her face.

“Wha?” he asked, clearly shocked at her refusal.

“Harry! I love you, morning breath and all, but do something about it.”

Harry’s shock melted into blushing surprise, and he chuckled at the humour of the situation. His mirth caused Tracey’s, and the two of them were soon guffawing on his bed.

“Everything is fine here?” a voice asked from the doorway.

Harry calmed enough to send a “Yes, mum.” before he laughed again.

Petunia Dursley looked fondly at the two of them for a few seconds, before speaking again. “Since you’re up and about, come with me and we’ll make breakfast.”

The two teenagers complained good-naturedly – which teenager doesn’t complain about helping the adults? – before following her to the kitchen.

“Are you sure about the time difference?” Tracey asked as the two of them were putting bowls and spoons on the table. “It doesn’t leave at three in the morning?”

“Yes, I’m sure, and, no, it doesn’t.” Harry replied. “In fact, we could stay here until tomorrow dinner, and we’d still be on time. Not counting our small hourglass.” He finished, winking.

A couple of hours later, the two of them were clean – teeth brushed and all – and they were relaxing in a comfortable hug on one of the lounge’s couches. Tracey had her back to Harry, who had his arms around her stomach and his face in her hair.

He suddenly let out a small chuckle, and Tracey half-turned at the noise.

“Do you recall Goken’s face?” Harry asked, reminiscing. “That was... priceless.”

“Sure I do. I was in front of him, remember? And I agree about the priceless thing. We should have taken a picture.”

“Well, it’s too late, now. But I wonder...”

“What?”

“...if there are ways to print pictures from our memories.”

That got them thinking for a while, before she shrugged the topic off. “We’ll finish this discussion at Hogwarts. I’m sure Hermione would help. And that little critter, too. What’s his name? The photo-obsessed Gryffindor?”

“Creevey? Colin Creevey?” Harry asked.

“Yes, that’s him. I remember him saying things about making printouts about Omniocular-recorded images. And someone I can’t remember made a comment about Pensieves and Omnioculars once. A Slytherin, I think.”

“Alright, alright.” he said, tucking this bits of information in a "To do" memory block. “What do you want to talk about, then?”

“I don’t know. It was just a suggestion.”

“A sound one, since we’d have more material at Hogwarts to explore this.”

“What were we talking about, before that?”

“Just Goken and you beating the snot out of him.”

“Thanks to you.” Tracey pointed out, turning slightly so that she could look at him while sitting sideways on his lap.

Harry frowned, and his eyes acquired a faraway look, the one Tracey knew as "I’m thinking about something useful." After several seconds, she interrupted him. “What are you thinking about?”

“Uh? Oh... I was merely thinking about sharing what I gave you with the others, and giving each of you something useful.”

“What, kisses?” she asked, smirking.

“No!” he exclaimed indignantly.

“-because I think a couple of our friends could be interested.”

Harry blushed, before he caught his girlfriend’s amusement. He sighed and rubbed his eyes. “Too much information, Trace.”

“What, then?”

“What I want to share or what’s useful?”

“Both.”

“I want to share the martial arts training. And I want to give you... this.” he finished, extending his hand and calling with his magic. An instant later, his wakizashi had appeared there.

“Harry... I can’t accept. It’s yours! And, if I remember correctly, I can’t even touch it, right?”

“I want you to have it. Goken told me how to customize them, and I think that, by putting a drop of your blood in the hilt, it will be available to either of us.”

She frowned. “Won’t that be a problem?”

“What?”

“Imagine that we are in separate places, fighting, and we call for it at the same time.”

Harry opened his mouth to give an answer, but closed it immediately afterwards. “Hmmm... you’re right, of course. Normally, I don’t use it anymore, but you’re right. Besides, I want to give weapons to each of our friends and I have only six of them.”

She looked at him. “Harry... Goken offered them to you, right?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Ask him where he got them.” she said, before rolling her eyes and muttering “Men! No sense of shopping!”

A second later, she found herself with a pillow across her face, and it started a fight that lasted until lunch, escalating until all the kids were having an organized war. James joined Harry, and the twins joined Tracey, and, despite Harry’s use of magic, the boys found themselves losing.

After lunch, Harry returned to see Goken, and asked him about the weapons. After a brief discussion, the man agreed to make an order of a dozen reduced sets to his usual supplier.

The next day, Harry and Tracey saw themselves getting up late again, but it was a calculated move: since their time was 8 hours later than England, they would spend a very long day already, and they didn't want to fall asleep of exhaustion during the train ride or the dinner. Especially since they had plans for the ride.

After everyone told them goodbye, the two magical teenagers left, Apparating to London. After arriving in an empty alleyway near King's Cross station, they entered said station and went to platform 9¾ to board the Hogwarts Express for their returning trip.

Once there, their usual group congregated around them, and they all thanked each other for the Christmas gifts, before sitting down as the train left the station. Afterwards, Harry was unusually silent, looking at them one after the other or having his faraway look. Thanks to her increased closeness with him, Tracey had a faint idea about why he did so, and she didn't comment. Finally, after several minutes, he spoke again.

"Enter." he said just as a knock was heard on the compartment's door.

Behind said door were three people, who entered the already cramped space. Harry closed and locked the door behind them, before closing the windows' shutters. Before anyone could even comment on the lack of space, he enlarged the compartment so that all nine of them could sit comfortably. There were Harry and Tracey, Ron and Ginny, Hermione, Susan, and the three newcomers were Luna and the Weasley twins.

"Alright, people." he said, gaining their immediate attention. "We have several hours before we reach Hogwarts, and I want to take advantage of this to tell you a few things, and to give you an offer."

They nodded in silence, waiting.

"First of all, I met Merlin."

“What?”

“How?”

“His grave, you mean?”

“I don’t believe it!”

Harry and Tracey exchanged a smile. That had been the expected reaction. When the questions finished raining on him, he spoke again.

“I’m not going to explain how or why. But I met him, and he’s alive despite being... out of touch with reality. He is an Oracle, now, and made several predictions while I was there. Some of them I couldn’t understand, and others I fear will concern us.”

When he stopped, the others looked at him in wonder, but they let him continue.

“So, the first thing that I want is to offer you – I mean, except Luna who doesn’t need it – the best in mind protection that I can do.” Harry raised his hand to forestall Hermione’s questions about Luna and Ron’s comment about his own mind being protected already. “I know that you all have some kind of protection already – otherwise, you wouldn’t know me – but I want to bring that up-to-date. Do you agree?”

A chorus of acceptance was heard around him.

“Good. The next thing will be to equip you.”

“Equip us?” Ron blurted out.

Harry nodded and held his right hand forward, concentrating. His wakizashi appeared almost immediately and the others gasped.

“I want you all to have weapons to defend yourselves in the coming battles we will have with Voldemort and his minions.”

The reactions to his words were immediate, varied, and quite intense.

Thinking that it was a joke, Ron cracked up in laughter, before being smacked upside the back of his head by his sister.

“But... we don’t know how to wield... that.” Fred said.

“We don’t even know its name!” George added.

“It’s not our job to fight.” Hermione said seriously. “It’s Dumbledore’s.”

“How can you even think about fighting You-Know-Who?” Susan asked, her eyes wide in worry.

And Luna... well, Luna was humming to her own tune, watching the proceedings amusedly.

After waiting for the commotion to die down, Harry spoke again. “I didn’t say if. I said we will. It’s merely a matter of when. So I want you prepared. You... you are the ones who count.”

In the pause that followed, Tracey patted his back gently while he fought his emotions. If what Merlin had said was going to happen – and, according to Flamel, there was no reason not to – his friends were in danger, the red-haired ones especially.

And it was in that way that his audience started to learn most of his proficiencies. Most but not all of them, since Harry didn’t know how to transfer his grasp over time and his way of Apparating and entering others’ minds. Nevertheless, they all gained a grasp over regular Apparation and Legilimency. And, over the following weeks, they would all get a couple of additional Animagus shapes as well.

The Hogwarts Express always leaving London at eleven and arriving at nine in the evening, Harry had enough time to spend one hour on each of them. It went relatively well, especially with the aspirin tablets Harry had prepared for the occasion. The only ones he did differently were Tracey and Luna. Tracey’s mind was already protected and

loaded with information – whatever he had done there helped him quicken the process for the others – and Luna’s... well, Luna’s mind proved impossible to stay in, but she absorbed his memories faster than the others.

Once all was said and done, they still had enough time to get dressed before the train pulled in Hogsmeade station. The nine teenagers followed the chaotic crowd sedately, most of them exploring their new memories at their own pace. And, even if they didn’t have the muscles to apply all their new techniques, they were all fit thanks to the fighting clubs they belonged to, and it wouldn’t take long for them to be up-to-date.

A little bit later, in the Headmaster’s office...

The Headmaster looked at the door – through it, in fact, thanks to his glasses – and recognized the boy who had knocked.

“Enter, Draco.”

The teenage boy huffed at the old man’s cheerfulness, but schooled his expression quickly, his mask of arrogance slipping in place. He had been inconspicuously invited in the old man’s office right after the Feast, and was quite wary at what it meant.

“You requested my presence, Headmaster Dumbledore?” he asked, with the haughtiness befitting a Malfoy. Dumbledore noticed that the verbal tricks were there as well: by using his name and position, the boy implied that Dumbledore’s stay at his current position was only temporary. It was only truth, but it carried a hidden threat that an experienced man couldn’t miss.

However, Dumbledore didn’t frown. He had a trump card, and whatever the Death Eaters did to educate Draco would be unravelled as soon as he would make his next move. Like what had happened last time.

He uncapped the pensieve containing the boy’s memories.

“I want to offer you these memories.” he said simply.

“Why?”

“I think you could benefit from them. If you don’t want them afterwards, you can always reject them, putting them back in the pensieve. I just want to give you a bit of knowledge.” Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling madly.

Draco’s thought process was disturbed when he noticed the man’s eyes and he nodded. After all, which cunning Slytherin would reject a free offer? And Dumbledore, with his reputation of insanity, wouldn’t trap him, would he?

Underestimating an opponent is not a wise move.

Upon recovering his own memories from before the holidays, Draco shuddered, trembled, whimpered and shook, before he was finally able to cope with his double life.

“Welcome back, Mr Malfoy.” Dumbledore intoned seriously.

A weak chuckle answered him. “You can say that, Headmaster. After all, I’ve been out of my mind for two weeks now.”

“Anything to report?”

And Draco recounted his Christmas among Death Eaters. Dumbledore sighed when he heard that junior Death Eaters had a mean to contact their Dark families, but his mind provided him with dozens of means to circumvent that already. With the charms he had unearthed when he explored the functionalities of Harry’s booklets, he wouldn’t be terribly difficult to create a filter to these things.

Draco told him that Lucius Malfoy was still a soul-eating demon who only barely refrained from taking those of the children on vacation there, and that Snape wasn’t the Potion Master he once was, but that his spell-casting power had increased dramatically. After being

exposed to the man's fireball once, the Death Eaters scurried out of his way. And his clone's.

Dumbledore also learnt that Voldemort knew that one of his main opponents could be Hogwarts' Defence teacher. It troubled him quite a bit, because he knew that this teacher was Harry Potter. He wouldn't reveal this to the blond boy, though.

But the thing that threw him off course was the fact that a muggle – not a muggle-born or anything magical, a muggle – had been seen traipsing the corridors of the Dark Lord's hidden fortress and conversing with said Dark Lord in a business-like manner. Nothing was known of that muggle except his age, which could only be guessed from his white hair.

After Draco finally left, the old man stayed at his desk, contemplating the new information pensively.
That Saturday...

Harry was cheering both teams in the air. He had been a Hufflepuff once, and most of his friends were Gryffindors. Besides, as a teacher and not a Head of House, it wouldn't do to be partial during a Quidditch game.

Gryffindor were leading the poor Hufflepuff formation 120 to 40 when the Snitch was seen for the second time. As the two Seekers tried to outfly each other, Harry was progressively annoyed by something vibrating in his pocket. It was only when the chase ended – with the Snitch escaping again – that he recognized the feeling. Someone was writing in his messaging booklets!

And, as all his friends were here, that meant that someone of his extended family was trying to contact him. He frowned. Who could it be so that it couldn't wait? He had already tested the portable computer with the satellite phone – out of the wards, of course – and it had worked just fine, although it was a tad slow compared to the computer at Jorg's workplace in Todai. He had sent mails to his family and muggle friends using this, and had had a quick chat with his alter ego as well.

A sense of foreboding creeping up his spine, he excused himself and left his seat. In the darkness of the stairs, he ignored the sounds of the game and opened his book, his ring providing enough light to read – he now had a better control on his katana-turned-ring. And what he saw made him shudder.

There was blood. And only one word: Help.

Without a third thought – his second one being to warn Tracey mentally – he disappeared, heading to the identified source of the message: Switzerland. Powell. His ex-spy friend.

Once there, he had to prevent himself from appearing in the house and gasped at what he noticed. The house was damaged beyond recognition, and more attacks were coming from outside. Absently wondering about who was powerful enough to disrupt his Fidelius, Harry made a quick tour of the house through the gaseous reality, and he located a crying Genevieve near a fallen Powell, in the basement.

He appeared, and cast a reinforcing charm on the basement's ceiling, followed with an avoidance ward and a silencing charm. Now free from the mayhem around them, he went to the prone spy.

“What happened?” he asked her.

When he didn't get a response, he looked at her and noticed her distraught state. He sent calming thoughts and asked the question again. While she answered, he looked at the man in front of him, focusing on his wounds, and trying his best to heal them.

“We were preparing lunch.” the young woman was saying. “He came back from one of his errands this morning... and we were preparing lunch when... the window exploded! He... he pushed me out of the kitchen just as... something went through the window. A second later, the thing exploded, and... everything started to fall apart! He was hurt, but... he pushed me all the way to here. More explosions followed. I think he was hurt again, because he collapsed in the stairs and I tried to hold him. I didn't know what to do, but I

noticed one of your magic booklets in his pocket and I called for help. Is he... dead?"

During the explanation, Harry had explored the man's wounds, but he couldn't do much. Grenade shrapnel had imbedded in the man's spine and head, damaging his mind and body beyond recovery. His eyes teary, he nodded absently and Genevieve flew into his arms, sobbing.

Less than three seconds later, Harry recovered.

"I have to find out how and why it happened." he told her. "You are secure here. I'll be right back."

And he Apparated out, ready to unleash hell onto whoever took his friend's life.

Despite being in rubble, the house was still under fire, to the point of his Fidelius charm flickering in and out. It wouldn't be long before it crumbled completely.

Harry focused on the direction of the fire and noticed something strange: the street was almost empty. No pedestrian, and almost no car. Almost.

In front of the house was a ZIL-114 limousine, and between the car and the house, several men were positioned around something which looked like a very large gun on a pedestal – an automatic and mechanically oscillating turret with a high-powered rifle and a grenade launcher. The... thing... was slowly aiming around the undetectable house, continually firing at it. Harry was angry enough that he didn't stop to think about it. He dove forward and made one of the men stop the turret.

Unfortunately, the seven men there were Special Forces with a mission, and they quickly noticed that one of them wasn't acting in accord with the established plan. They had been warned that such an occurrence was to be expected, and two bullets found the man's chest before he could fully accomplish Harry's wish. They then took place closer around the turret, guns drawn and looking around, and

even up, with special goggles – the ones that could see the infrareds generated even from an invisible wizard.

Harry knew that the house was in shambles, and that the basement would hold for some time, so he sat down – in the empty air of the gaseous reality – to ponder about this. The street was empty, but he could hear gun shots at both ends. Visibly, the men were prepared – to the point of bringing a war engine in the middle of a street of a civilian town in a neutral country – and had come in more than one team to secure the location.

Harry's eyes widened when he realized what all that meant. Not having a mind, an automatic mechanism wouldn't be disturbed by notice-me-not charms, and the Fidelius was "only" an extension of said charm. While men would fire left and right of a house under Fidelius, robotized firearms would not. And now, his house was in ruins and his friend dead.

His anger flaring again, he invaded the mind of the men there, one after the other. In each of them, he started by preventing the man from moving, before grasping everything of interest from their memories. He learnt several languages of the Russian federation countries. He learnt that they had been hired anonymously, and that they had to off Powell. They had followed him to the house where he had disappeared. When reporting, they had been told to set up the attack the way they did. They had caused accidents at both ends of the street to empty it and prevent the police from interrupting them. And they had proceeded in destroying the house methodically.

After having immobilized all of them, Harry made the last one stop the turret and wait, unmoving. However, it was too late already, and, not having any house to hide anymore, the Fidelius disappeared.

Once again, Harry sat down to ponder about his situation. Powell was dead. Or was he? Harry absently fingered his Time Turner through his shirt. He could save him. He knew he could. But he would have to plan carefully. Despite a raging headache from the imported memories, his mind tried to grasp all the possibilities. He had to leave the timeline untouched, but he could do anything he wanted beside that. He had found a dying Powell and a sobbing Genevieve, so, if he

decided to save the man, he had to make his past self believe he found a dying Powell as well. Powell got his lethal wounds when he had been at the top of the basement stairs, and there was only one moment when he'd be alone.

Between the mercenaries in front of him, Harry chose the one man who fitted his criteria the most: corpulence resembling Powell's, unredeemable acts of killing against innocents – all of these qualified as fully-willing acts of cold-blooded slaughter – and no family who would miss him. Smirking, he extended his hand out of the gaseous reality just as policemen finally invaded the eerily silent street, grabbed the still man and Apparated him out. He then slung the Time Turner chain around both their necks and rewound one hour of time.

Harry knew he had only a short time before hell broke loose. He had half the mind to stop the attack altogether, but knew that he couldn't. As he was, merely staying at the place of the disaster with a Russian mercenary, he felt constricted by the rules of time. He had only a small margin, a small window of opportunity.

His jaw set in a grim expression, he took it. He started by morphing the soldier's body, face, and clothes to resemble Powell's. He then reprogrammed the man's mind completely, and made it so he'd protect Genevieve's life with his own. He knew that this was against his decisions from much earlier – when he had vowed not to change minds again – but he was already sending the man towards death... what was a little mind surgery compared to this?

Knowing that the man would stay put because of his new mind, he then unfroze him. And, after positioning the two of them in the gaseous reality of the house's kitchen, he waited for the assault to begin.

When it did, as soon as Powell pushed the woman out of the kitchen, Harry pushed the mercenary out and grabbed Powell. He continued to mentally direct the Russian man until he tumbled over Genevieve in the basement's stairs, fatally hit in the head. Harry was of half a mind to leave the things like that, but a push made him look at the frantic Powell beside him.

“Calm down.” he told him. “Calm...”

He stopped when he noticed the booklet in the man’s pocket. Of course! Harry grabbed it and flew to the basement where he had just the time to put it in the mercenary’s pocket from the gaseous reality. He saw that Genevieve hadn’t noticed it before, but she did now and grabbed it with bloodied and shaky hands.

He returned to the stranded Powell – muggles couldn’t move around in the gaseous reality – and headed out with him. He had to leave the place before his past self could see him. Thankfully, the booklets worked even in case of Time-Turner-caused duplication, and both Harrys (past and future) got the message.

“What was that?” Powell finally yelled. “Why did you left her to die?”

“She won’t.” Harry answered. “I found her already. The whole thing was to prevent your death.”

The man huffed, mumbling that it was his job to die, but Harry noticed that Powell had taken his words to heart – he was just too proud to thank him right now. Harry cleaned the man’s wounds, and waited for his past self to finish in the basement before heading there again. He explained the whole thing to Genevieve, while Powell listened with a distracted ear, occupied as he was with the mercenary’s body. Which looked like his own.

“Impressive. But, then again, you did it already for me.” he finished, remembering about Harry changing his identity.

“I guess I will have to do it again.” Harry said, contemplating. “Before we leave, is there something you will miss from the wreckage?”

“I have some data I didn’t want to lose, but it’s too late, now.” Genevieve said dejectedly.

“It’s never too late.” Harry said mischievously. “You?” he asked Powell.

“I could do with my weapons. They are hard to procure in Switzerland.”

Harry nodded, and motioned them to come closer. After removing the charms in the basement and Apparating out with them, he positioned his Time Turner around their joined hands, and activated it again. One hour earlier in time, while their past selves were bantering lightly in the kitchen, unaware of the upcoming hell, Genevieve and Powell silently retrieved their stuff.

Harry then brought them to Genevieve's apartment, and, after settling down, he asked Powell the question that had been burning his lips since he harvested the mercenaries' memories.

“Why were they after you? The mercenaries, I mean. They followed you, and when they noticed that you disappeared as you entered the house, they knew what to do!”

Powell's shoulders slumped and he looked at his hands, wondering how he could phrase this. “First of all, thank you.” he finally admitted. “For saving my life, and Genevieve's.”

Harry nodded, but his gaze meant business, and Powell continued his report.

“As you know, I have been in distant contact with the most influential spy agencies around the world, your help in taking another's identity having been invaluable. The last time I took interest in the GRU's activities was during and after the Christmas vacation. Their leader, whom we know as "the General" was conspicuously absent from the facility.”

“What does that have to do with the problem?”

“I dug a little farther than I was allowed to, and found that the General was often in Egypt.”

Harry frowned and motioned to Powell to continue. Something was definitely fishy, there, but he hadn't put his finger on it yet.

"On the rare times the General was back in Moscow, he brought the department heads together, and we were issued strange notices shortly afterwards. Unfortunately, someone found about my nosing around, and I had to leave before things got heated. But not before hearing that the General's whole expression had changed, and his eyes seemed glazed over. As these were signs you told me to look for, I remembered it."

"Imperius." Harry commented absently. "What do you mean by 'strange notices'?"

Powell looked at Harry in the eye. "Most of them contained methods to fight people in robes waving sticks around."

Harry gasped. "But... Egypt? How could he push the muggles against the wizards? That's insane!" he exclaimed, jumping to his feet and starting to pace as he ranted. "He's sawing the very branch he's sitting on! Doesn't he know that the population ratio is thousands to one? And that's not even taking into account the muggle weapons! On top of that, if they know how to circumvent the Fidelius, the Wizarding world has no chance!"

"I'm sorry-" Powell started, but Harry cut him short.

"Don't be. Thank you for telling me all this. I have to research about this. Can I have your mind for a second?"

The retired spy nodded, and Harry extracted all the information he needed about the GRU and a few of its employees.
One week later...

Harry had fallen into his routine again, and repeated each day at least once. While he was doing so, between his other errands, Harry went to the GRU headquarters at Moscow through the gaseous reality, only to be surprised to find an anti-Apparation field surrounding the

whole building. He decided to wait patiently and, when the employees left the building at the end of the day, he took the identity and appearance of one of them, Piotr Tchoutenko.

The next day, he managed to keep Piotr – who was single – Stunned and hidden in his own flat, while he explored the Headquarters under his guise and identity. Nothing was really new, but he discovered many signs that magic had been used there. And, concerning the elusive General, he discovered that he was currently in Siberia for a surprise inspection of the nuclear trains, and that he had an Aeroflot flight booked for Cairo in ten days. After memorizing the plane number, Harry left and let Piotr take his place back at work – with enough modified memories for his stunt to stay unobtrusive. Another week later...

Harry and his friends were sitting in a circle in his quarters. During the last weeks, they had used transfigured weapons to train themselves in the martial arts proficiencies Harry had gifted them with. They were now given an oblong box made of akamatsu – Japanese red pine wood – with their name on top. Three spare boxes rested in one of Harry's cupboards.

“Open them.” he told them.

They obeyed, and several sharp intakes of breath could be heard in the room. Harry looked around, satisfied to find them enjoying their gift. Because it was such a large order, Goken had hired several master weaponsmiths, and it had taken Harry a few trips to Japan to instruct them about the personality of each wielder. Tracey had proven herself quite able with wielding two short swords at the same time, and the two wakizashis she had been offered seemed attuned to her, decorated as they were with feline themes – a link to her initial Animagus shape, the lynx. Of course, these were the real stuff, not the dulled ones he had acquired for them before: all swords were sharpened into deadly weapons. Additionally, the unsharpened side of Tracey's wakizashis had a raised guard, making them very much like a sai in that regard: a perfect tool for blocking slashing attacks and disarming swords.

Ron always liked grand and impressive things, from his messenger eagle to the additional Animagus shape he had asked Harry about: the bear – although, to fight that particular redhead's laziness, Harry had told him to do the research by himself; Harry had no experience in bears whatsoever, and he had convinced Ron that anything accomplished by oneself in its entirety was much more rewarding. Following that line of thoughts, Harry offered him a tashi – a longer-than-usual katana – which blade contained as much copper as was possible without removing its strength. That gave the whole sword a reddish tinge, and, furthermore, the handle and guard were decorated with imprints of badgers and bears as well.

Hermione had never been one for physical fight, much like Susan, and the two of them found themselves with two weapons each: a distance weapon, and one that could be used defensively as well. Hermione was quite tall for a girl her age, and she got a daikyu and a bo – a Japanese long bow and a staff – while Susan, who was more petite and curvy, obtained a hangkyu and a couple of tonfas – the equivalent short bow and the t-shaped nightstick. Both of them found the weapons ideal for them. Ginny, quite proficient in close-quarters fighting, found herself with two tantos and a pair of nunchakus. And the twins, adept of chaotic weaponry, got a three-sections staff and a kusari-gama. Like Tracey's and Ron's, all of these weapons were personalized with hints about their primary Animagus forms, and they all got the appropriate hole in their handles to link them to their owners through their blood.

The only one not having such a weapon was Luna. Harry had tried to teach her how to fight, but she had never relented, preferring defensive manoeuvres instead of attack. So, for her, he had obtained two round shields made of sturdy metal. Since they couldn't have been made by the same armourers, they hadn't been designed with the same Charms the others' weapons held. Instead, they were developed as a pair of bracers, which could be enlarged at will, and they were also weightless for their wearer. Luna was delighted, and, upon trying them with her sparring partners, she came up with a plethora of interesting and unexpected moves: from using one as a Frisbee to enlarging one to knock her opponents, she was never repetitive.

On top of everything, Harry gave all of his friends an additional Animagus shape, and that was the wolf's. As it was, he would be the leader, but he knew that a pack of wolves, when working together, was a deadly opponent – and the symbolism wasn't lost to his friends either.

A few days later...

It was the night of the full moon, and Harry had an ominous feeling that something was going to happen soon. Staying in the gaseous reality, he had been following the General since he stepped out of the plane, but found himself stopped by another anti-Apparation field. He had no choice but to Apparate in, Disillusion himself, and walk the last mile of the road to a field of ruins he knew already.

‘Here we go again. I hope I will pass the charm, now.’ he thought to himself, before an eerie feeling took hold of him. Part of this new feeling was something he had sought for months, while another part was disturbing. There were five Death Eaters there, and they were wearing muggle camouflage outfits on top of being hidden under a Disillusionment charm of their own. It was of no use, because, thanks to Harry's mind virus, they were broadcasting the beacon signal to him. But they weren't out there under a mere compulsion to breathe fresh air, no. They were guarding something. And not only were they cautious, but they were highly energized too. Unnaturally so. Harry went in the mind of the first one he found and explored his past to learn how he could be so keyed up, but he only noticed memories of people in white lab coat injecting something into the Death Eater's arm.

It was only thanks to his highly focused Disillusionment spell that Harry could pass the enemy lines undetected. Any half-baked spell would have raised the alarm. He quickly found himself behind the group surrounding the General as they were descending some uneven stairs into the ruins. It started easily enough.

The problems began when the group turned into a corridor and merely disappeared. Harry stopped, surprised that a group of muggles could disappear as if by magic. His reflection was cut short, though, when someone tripped on him.

The guards!

Of the five men outside, three were closely following the group of muggles, protecting their rear. As they were inside, their beacon was deactivated, Harry realized. And when the first one tripped on him, the second caught up with an unnatural speed and lunged at the Disillusioned teenager, arms outstretched in a classic grab-the-invisible-man move.

Harry didn't have any problem meeting the man's charge with a vicious punch, but the speed of the men disturbed him greatly. What was that about? If his memory – or, rather, the one he had read earlier – served him correctly, these Death Eaters weren't trained in martial arts or such, and had no experience in hand-to-hand combat. Their speed, however, belied this.

Without even discussing between them, the three Death Eaters fought strongly, as individuals and as a team: each of them was armed with a wand and a knife, and were making a good use of both to dispel his Disillusionment charm and to attack him. It was only with the help of his staff that Harry was able to block most of their attacks and throw a few himself. Anyone else would have been bludgeoned into a pulp and sliced to ribbons in seconds.

Still, one of their attacks caused Harry to wince and retreat a few steps to inspect the damage. Harry's skin was hardened as much as possible so it wasn't the problem. The thing that was broken was a small pendant still tucked under his robes. A pendant in the shape of a small hourglass.

His Time Turner.

With the item broken, Harry went into defensive mode and waited for strange events to happen. All he felt was the skin of his chest being singed for a couple seconds and a strange tingling echoing in his whole being before the magic fizzled out. He didn't have time to examine himself or bemoan his useful artefact, though, and returned his attention to the fight at hand.

A dozen seconds later, the four fighters continuing to exchange blows and spells, Harry discovered that his Stunners didn't work as much as usual: the men merely shook their head and fought again. And they were quick enough to dodge conjured ropes. Denied of his choices to end the fight without casualties, Harry decided to go for the kill, figuratively and literally. The three men quickly found the pointy end of Harry's katana going through one vital organ or another. Even though they resisted and attempted a couple attacks afterwards – despite the pain it must cause them –, the three of them collapsed at last. A couple seconds later, as Harry was searching their corpses for hints about their state, they shimmered and disappeared.

‘Damn.’ Harry thought. ‘They must have adopted muggles techniques on top of their magic – I remember Powell telling about mental strategies where, by removing your dead from the battlefield, you make your side appear invulnerable. And, if each of their new Death Eaters is that strong already, we don't have much of a chance against the whole of them.’

During the fight, the four fighters had moved in random directions, and Harry had been pushed back by the opposition until he was almost touching the end of the corridor. Unbeknownst to him, it wasn't the corridor end he had seen initially, but the true end.

In the same way people could bring friends into Fidelius-protected location, the three men had pushed Harry through the charm.

As Harry looked up from the blood-stained floor, his eyes fell on a section of the wall where hieroglyphs were following a particular pattern. Sure, most of the ruin was covered in them from floor to ceiling, but that one part was different... and familiar, somehow. And he hadn't noticed it the last time he had visited the ruins.

Harry was torn: he was tired and his Time Turned was broken, and he had half the thought of getting out gathering support. However, it had already been such a pain to discover that place that he stayed and examined the wall closely. After a few minutes, he remembered where he had seen that particular arrangement: it was in Bill Weasley's last letter. Among the drawings, the letter had contained information about a key.

The key...

Harry's eyes narrowed as he contemplated the jewel that was embedded in the wall itself. The Eye of Ra. Thinking of it as a key, and mesmerized by its beauty, Harry extended his hand and touched the Eye...

...and he disappeared.

To be continued in next chapter: The Mother of All Storms...

New weapons again, which are
Given to his friends, who are
Prepared to battle, at last.
They should, because peace won't last.

Chapter 33 – The Mother of All Storms
posted April 17th, 2006

“Ssstand up!” Voldemort hissed.

The assembled Death Eaters slowly came to their senses. It had been a hell of an orgy, and, despite the fact that all of them were naked, none of them was in the mood for a repeat performance. It wouldn't be required, though, since the Calling ritual had been successful. The feelings of lust coming from the hundred and fifty men and women in the room – recruitment had been successful lately, especially in the countries under the Russian rule – had successfully brought forth the body of Rodolphus Lestrage, inhabited by the spirit of the archdemon Asmodai. The archdemon was standing regally in the middle of a pentagram surrounded by ex-virgins, a satisfied smirk on his lips.

“Have a night of ressst, my followerssss.” the Dark Lord ordered his troops, before turning to his infernal ally. “Are we ready to work together, like lassst time?”

“I am.” the demon answered. When Voldemort didn't answer, apparently waiting for something, Asmodai sighed. “Very well. I swear fealty to you until my mission is accomplished. Satisfied?”

“Quite, yesss. One isss never too careful.” the Dark Lord said, before speaking several magical words. Instantaneously, the pentagram disappeared and Asmodai was free once more. “Your misssion isss to asssisst me in my world conquessst.”

“Fine with me.”

“We have much to plan, though. Here isss what I thought...”

And Voldemort, with Lucius Malfoy at his side, conferred with Asmodai all night long. After all, none of them required sleep. And they sent messages to long-time allies afterwards.

Exhausted by their earlier romp, most of the Death Eaters slept in, only to be up and about in the middle of the afternoon. It went well with Voldemort's plan, since he intended to take advantage of the night and the full moon to bring along the few vampires and werewolves devoted to his cause.

At eight that day, after his followers had enjoyed a light dinner, Voldemort told them about his plan – that is, the part they had to know: it wasn't needed for them to know all the details. He was in the middle of a sentence when the door to Snape's quarters banged open and the man passed through them. "My lo-"

He didn't have time to continue his sentence, because, keyed up as he was about his plan, Voldemort was in no mood to be interrupted. The snake-like Dark Lord whirled and cursed the offender. "Crucio!"

Voldemort knew that he had to hurry the plan along, and he reluctantly released Snape from the grasp of the torture curse. It wasn't before the Potion Master had banged himself on the floor a couple of times because of the convulsions, though. Snape then lifted his sallow head and mumbled something.

"What wasss that?" Voldemort demanded, his wand held threateningly high.

Snape spit one of his teeth out and looked at his master. "There are omens against us, my lord."

"Omenssss?" Voldemort demanded. "What kind of omen can hinder usss?" he asked with a haughty smirk, his arms encompassing the room and the two demons at his side.

"There is a sand storm progressing, my lord. A big one. It could-"

"Don't you know that we travel by portalssss, now?" Voldemort asked, eyes narrowed. "The ssstorm won't impact usss at all! Don't you agree, Asssmodai?" he finished, turning to the addressed fiend.

“I concur with Lord Voldemort.” the demon answered. “We are ready, now. When we will be done with them, nothing will stand in our path. I can feel the taste of victory already.” he finished, a maniac gleam in the eyes.

“More like the smell of sex.” Snape answered curtly, clearly not impressed by the demon – after all, he, too, had inhabited Hell for some time. “And don’t count your chicken bef-”

“That’ssss enough!” Voldemort interrupted. “Crucio!”

The Potion Master fell on the floor again, writhing in pain. To his credit, the man didn’t scream like the other Death Eaters, but that particular feat didn’t appease the Dark Lord, though. While he was maintaining the curse on the struggling man, Voldemort turned to his other followers and allies. “Bring the weaponssss, we will leave immediately.”

A few minutes later, Voldemort passed the portal to Little Hangleton, immediately followed by his demonic allies. Then came the Dark Lord’s most trusted followers, and they were carrying a heavy metal trunk holding the tube-like weapons. Finally came Snape and the Death Eaters of lower standing.

However, as Snape had predicted, large sand storms and magic seldom mixed. In this kind of storm, the friction of the sand generated enough electricity to disrupt magical fields. As fate would have it, Voldemort and the first hundred of followers passed through without problem. The next forty, however, were suffering increasingly severe cases of splinching. Among them, fifteen would be able to continue the fight, another fifteen would be permanently invalid, and the last ten arrived dying or dead already. The ten very last Death Eaters didn’t even deign to appear, their bodies spread all over the countries between the portal’s two exits – which meant half of the European countries. After all, with a jump that long and the randomness caused by the storm, the splinched parts could be anywhere; reassembling the bodies of the crippled Death Eaters wouldn’t be possible before the missing parts started to decay.

Voldemort's good mood faded slightly when he noticed that his army was shorter by so many men, especially as Snape had warned him about not leaving right now. He quickly rationalized the occurrence, though, thinking that, as new recruits, his loss wasn't overly large, especially now that he had Asmodai back with him. After checking that the invalids could take care of themselves and the dead, he went to the remaining men and, pointing his wand at a length of rope, he spoke the incantation for the portkey spell. It was still easier for him to cast a portkey spell sending people in the same country; the portal spell had been made through a concerted effort of several wizards, who had had to rest afterwards, which is why it had led to Little Hangleton instead of Hogwarts.

"Everyone, grab the rope." he said, and, a few minutes later, he spoke the activation words: "To Hogwartsss!"
Meanwhile, somewhere in the cyberspace...

Copycat was bored. Bored beyond measure. And, as the wise men say, boredom is the source of all sins.

He was still playful enough to engage in numerous chats and networked video games around the world. However, he had soon established the profile of the average chatting teenager and Doom player, and it quickly became a mere occupation to pass his time.

He was still curious enough to have fragments of his consciousness move around on the network and gather information. However, like it was the case with the chat engines, most of that data wasn't interesting at all.

And, noticing that a satellite launch was going to happen soon, he was curious and bored enough to wonder what would happen if he added a part of his consciousness in a spacecraft.

The hackers of that time were very proficient – although some still got arrested and eventually convicted, like Kevin Poulsen – but Copycat had several advantages over them. For instance, he could travel through each of the electric networks with the same skill: computer links, telephone, and power grid. It granted him the ability to pass

through all kinds of software barriers, and eventually allowed him to push another downsized copy of his consciousness into a military satellite's computer.

For a few weeks, that new project would spark his interest, but mapping the Moon's surface wasn't an exciting job past the first few moments, and he would drop his interest in Clementine – the satellite's name.

Copycat was bored, and he was considering stopping his life on the network and starting a new one as a being of flesh and blood. After all, with the success of his many endeavours – Magic the Gathering was a flourishing affair – he was as loaded as one could be. For that, he needed the help of a particular woman: the woman who had allowed him to exist in the first place; the woman who knew the spells to transfer a person into electricity and vice-versa. The only problem was that he couldn't reach her by himself: his powers over electricity only reached places with electricity, i.e. not wizarding settlements. He had sent Harry a couple of e-mails to ask him about her, but his alter ego was noticeably offline.

He just hoped that his many mutations in the electric world wouldn't prevent him from being human again.
At the same time...

'Damn. Damn! DAMN!'

In the privacy of his own mind, Harry was cursing heavily. He kept it private, though: given his current difficulties, he didn't want to raise his voice to attract attention.

When he had touched the infamous key, he had felt a portkey-like pull, but it had changed something in his mind as well. And now, try as he might, though, he couldn't go in his mind to investigate, and that was driving him nuts more than anything.

Looking at the broken body at his feet, he ascertained the situation once more.

He had landed, naked, in what was surely the middle of an enormous labyrinth. No clothes, no weapon, nothing.

Inexplicably, his magic had been reined in – or away, he didn't know – and he couldn't cast a spell. Or switch realities. Or do anything relative to magic.

He really felt like a fish out of his bowl of water.

However, he was a fish with a kick: even if he couldn't access his powers, he still had the memories of muggle fighting styles. With vicious punches, strong kicks, and powerful throws, he had been able to get the better of the lone guard in front of him. The small man-like creature had charged him wordlessly as soon as he had noticed him, and Harry had had just enough time to dodge, before sending a flurry of blows, quickly reducing the man to an unconscious mass of flesh and broken bones.

Harry had then taken the man's leather outfit and put it on. Thankfully, it was his size and wasn't stinking or containing anything too unpleasant. He then grabbed the man's sword and inspected it. He recognized a kopesh – an Egyptian short sword made of bronze and resembling a wide-bladed wakizashi – and expertly swung it a couple of times before treading forward cautiously.

He spent three days in the maze, fighting almost non-stop. As soon as he thought he had some respite, another creature would traipse around.

Without the help of magic, Harry experienced some real difficulties, and he had collected several gashes along the way. On top of that, few of the vanquished enemies had any food or drink on themselves, and Harry was starved and thirsty as well.

After those excruciating three days, he was beginning to suffer from hallucinations as well, and it was in that state that he met a monster that topped all his previous encounters: a hydra.

In fact, it was as though the maze he was in was made to kill people while giving them hope that they could exit it. From the start, Harry

had met increasingly strong opponents, but his own strength wasn't infinite and he was close to his breaking point.

He readied his sword, waiting for the beast to attack, but something unexpected occurred: in the stale air of the maze, a wind picked up from nowhere. The hydra seemed as surprised as he was, but that didn't prevent her from attacking. Harry dodged to the best of his abilities, but he couldn't avoid all the heads that were lunging at him at once. One clamped at his right leg, and he felt bones breaking, muscles tearing, and a burning sensation started its way from the wound. Poison!

Meanwhile, the wind had been growing stronger quickly, and it now reached the strength of a full-blown storm. Besides his wounds, Harry could feel something in the wind. Something small and irritating. Grains of sand.

Suddenly, the hydra dropped him and reared its heads in confusion. Under Harry's eyes, it shimmered and flickered in and out of existence, before disappearing completely, to be replaced by a sight Harry was somewhat glad to find: the wall with the Eye of Ra imbedded in it. Harry couldn't feel any magic coming from it anymore, though, and he distinctly heard the sound of the wind howling in the temple's corridors. Making a wild guess, he supposed that the sand storm he was hearing was the cause for the disturbance in the ward's magic.

Harry was almost overwhelmed to feel his own magic returning to him, but he had gained a few things from his trip in what he would call a "mental maze": all his wounds had been transferred on his body, and he was losing blood from his injured leg.

Knowing that passing out wasn't an option, Harry first strengthened his mind before calling his power to block the poison and expel it from his body. It was enormously difficult and took quite a while, not only because of the inherent difficulty of cleansing the poison but also because of the disturbance the storm was causing. Eventually, proceeding by little touches, Harry succeeded and gave himself three seconds of rest. He then took care of the blood loss, closing his other cuts and scratches on the way.

He briefly considered Vanishing the black ichor having oozed off his leg wound, but his Apprenticeship came to the fore unexpectedly, and he opted to collect it in one of his indestructible bottles.

Now that he was up and about, he distinctively felt that the last three days in the maze had taken a toll on his nutrients level. Even if that could have been an altered perception of time given by the magical labyrinth, he had felt them, as well as the wounds. As if his senses were heightened by his primal need, he smelled something in the air. Something cooking. Something meaty, and juicy. Almost drooling, he followed the smell and came upon a larger room in the ruins, where several people were discussing in a tongue he thought he'd never hear for a long time: they were speaking in Tomacheck.

Touaregs! Harry stepped forward and used the usual greetings in their language. True to their reputation of hospitality, they gave him a part of their food and drink, and they all chatted amiably. It appeared that it was one of the tribes he had met while trekking through the desert, when he had left Egypt, three years before.

When his stomach was finally full, Harry stood up and thanked the men profusely. They seemed confused at his willingness to go out and leave through the storm, but Harry reassured them about his fate, before he left. He didn't leave the lower levels of the ruins, though. Following his earlier line of thought, confirmed by the difficulty he had had in casting healing spells, he supposed that magical means of travel would be difficult if they crossed the storm's area of effect. He could bypass that, thankfully: after switching to the alternate reality, in which he could observe arcs of lightning reflecting the storm's activity, he progressed deeper and deeper until he couldn't feel the storm hindering his progress. He then headed north-westwards and eventually reached the Mediterranean Sea.

Quite tired by the whole ordeal, he headed towards Hogwarts, wanting to spend a much-needed rest in his quarters. Things weren't going to happen that way, though.
At the same time...

Voldemort and his followers appeared behind the closed gates, and they all drew their wands, waiting for the Dark Lord to signal the attack. He didn't, though, and turned towards Snape with a wicked smirk on his face – that being a snake's, few people could actually say it was a smirk, and fewer could even qualify it as wicked.

“That sandstorm gave me an idea. You told me once that you had some control over the weather. Let's "storm" that castle with our season's greetings: a blizzard. You can do that, can you?”

“I can, my lord, but I will be highly ineffective afterwards. My kind of magic prevents me from repeating strong feats of magic closely to each other.”

“I don't really care at this point. We are too close to step back! Proceed.” the Dark Lord instructed.

While Snape was starting the long incantation, Voldemort turned to Asmodai. “I think you have an almighty sword you can use to strike that gate down, as soon as our resident weatherman has finished with his spellcasting.”

For answer, the archdemon picked the sword from the ground again and held it next to his grinning face. At the border of the Forbidden Forest, Voldemort noticed that several creatures were readying themselves for the battle as well, and he nodded to them.

And they all waited for the snowstorm to pick up, unaware that an old mage was preparing himself to welcome them.

What the Dark Lord didn't know was that Albus Dumbledore had extended the detection wards around Hogwarts. The defensive wards were still reaching the gate behind which the Death Eaters had assembled, but the detection covered much more ground, going a few additional miles in each direction.

Casting the additional spells had been tiresome for the old wizard, but the advantage was clear today, as a shrilling alarm warned him – and each of the castle's inhabitants – about the incoming threat. He had

just the time to notice the large crowd behind the gates – with three overly large and foreboding characters among them – before snow started to pour from the sky.

Albus Dumbledore had been a soldier, once, and had kept a few reflexes. As soon as the alarm had started, he had activated a feature that had been used only a couple of times in the school's millennium of existence. All the entrances were locked, and outside windows became walled. Hagrid was warned by a separate alarm and the half-giant had a portkey from his hut to the Entrance Hall for this kind of emergency.

A short time later, most of the Professors were stationed in the Entrance Hall. Dumbledore couldn't miss Harry's absence, though, nor could he understand why Flamel was there. If he remembered correctly, the old man had vowed on his magic not to fight ever again, and couldn't risk being forced to cast an offensive spell. The defending teachers took their position in front of the arrow slits in the wall – through which they could fire spells and stay quite protected. They saw the blizzard arriving and reducing their range of vision. They heard the gate fall to what could only be a powerful strike. They perceived that creatures were approaching. They felt...

"It might be our last stand." Flitwick said to Pomona Sprout, who was next to him.

"You're right." she said, her wand trembling in her suddenly shaky hand. She lunged at him and the two of them hugged. Soon, they were kissing, their hands under the other's robes.

That display was repeated on each and every pair of teachers – and sometimes threesome –, and Albus Dumbledore was shocked beyond measure. He had felt a slight twinge when looking at McGonagall, but he was too serious – too strong in Occlumency, as well – to let his thoughts drift in such a crucial moment.

"What is happening here?" he demanded. When his words didn't register, he immediately came to the most probable conclusion and threw several spells around the room, spells designed to keep mental

powers out. It didn't remove all the feeling of lust, though – an indication of the strength of whatever caused it – but the teachers separated from each other, most of them reddening in shame.

He was ready to scold them, when an explosion rocked the door and the room itself.

“Take your positions, and fire!” he yelled.

“But... we can't see anything!” Sprout exclaimed in despair.

“Fire in the general direction of the doorsteps.” he replied, before starting a long sequence of curses himself.

Another explosion rocked the fortified door, and cracks appeared through the wood and metal. At the same time, a sickly yellow cloud oozed in the room through most of the openings. The teachers tried to continue casting curses and hexes, but they had to breathe at some point. On top of that, the usual Bubble-head Charm was only working in that it was clearing the space around their head. As soon as it was freed, that space was immediately filled by the Stinking Cloud again. After three teachers found themselves painting the wall with their last meal, all of them were forced to retreat from the contaminated arrow slits. In the meantime, the explosions had continued against the entrance, and, despite the reinforcement charms Dumbledore was now casting on the door, the cracks widened.

And, through the cracks and the racket behind the door, a sound reached the assembled professors. An ominous sound. The howling of wolves.

Meanwhile, in another part of the castle...

Upon hearing the first alarm, the students followed the instructions given to them earlier in the year and regrouped in their House's common room, where they would wait for the alarm to subside. Knowing that their abilities could help, several older students tried to call for their Head of House, but no adult came. Recognizing the fact

that it wasn't an exercise, a group of eight teenagers decided to escape their respective common room and help anyways.

Thanks to Harry's tinkering with their mind, each of them had an avian form – an owl, to be even more inconspicuous in the Wizarding World. They had all agreed that it would be dead useful in situations where they couldn't escape – such as a free fall. They returned to their dorms discreetly and equipped themselves behind the privacy of their bed curtains. Once done, they morphed into birds and flew outside through the set of holes usually reserved for owls.

Even if they could reasonably suppose that their absence would be remarked, they didn't know that a couple of people would actually react to it.

The eight owls made a large sweep of Hogwarts and then tried to enter Harry's quarters, but, by now, Hogwarts' security procedure had locked all the owl holes as well, and they were stranded outside. They then landed atop the astronomy tower, where they took their human shape again, if only to be able to do magic and cast warming charms on themselves – by now, the wind had picked up and was howling ominously, and the snow was reducing their visibility severely. Hermione frowned in concentration and chanted an incantation the others weren't familiar with, and a small dome appeared around them. In the dome, the weather had no impact, and they could discuss unhindered.

“Trust Hermione to know this kind of spell.” Ron said good-naturedly, earning himself an equally good-natured smack on the back of his head from his sister.

“When we were flying, I felt evil thoughts and great anticipation coming from the crowd behind the gate.” Tracey said, returning to the subject at hand.

“How do you know that it was a crowd?” Fred asked, and, as usual, his twin continued his line of thought. “We couldn't see a yard away.”

Luna nodded. “She's the telepathetic.”

Tracey started. "I'm not... Never mind." she finished, shaking her head.

"What can we do?" Susan asked. "And where is Harry?"

That got them frowning, and Tracey closed her eyes in concentration. "I can't feel him!" she exclaimed suddenly.

They started to panic, but Hermione's voice brought them back. "Didn't Harry give us means to defend the castle?"

"But... we can't take a group of Death Eaters with our bare hands." Susan said.

"It's thankful, then, that we aren't bare-handed." Luna intervened.

"Did you forget the procedure Harry outlined with us?" Ginny asked gently.

Susan looked at her empty hands dejectedly. "I'm sorry."

"Well, it's not like you can't bring them to you, right?" the red-haired girl told her, a glint of mischief in her eyes.

At the same time, the clanking sound of metal against metal resounded over the storm's din. It was coming from the gate, and they immediately associated it with the fact that the enemy was actually entering the grounds. Another set of alarms started to blare, but Hermione waved her wand in an intricate motion and that particular sound disappeared. When everyone looked at her, she shrugged. "Selective Silencing Charm." she said.

Meanwhile, Susan had successfully brought her short bow into her hands, but a glance at the storm outside of their dome – which was looking more and more like an igloo – made her hang her head in defeat. "We can't see a thing." she complained.

Hermione raised her head sharply. "It's a good thing, then, that I asked Harry about his treasure chest."

"Treasure chest?" the twins asked, always ready at the slightest mention of mischief.

"He has plenty of military equipment, and I asked him about them. He agreed to lend some of them to me so that I could have a closer look. Here they are." she finished, taking a small bag from her pocket and upending it on the floor between them.

It was obviously an enlarged bag, as several items fell on the ground. Some were looking like elongated cubes of different shapes and colour, others like small bows on sticks, and there were a couple cylinders as well.

"What are these?" Ginny asked.

"These are crossbows." Hermione instructed. "They are like bows, but can fire more accurately. Their ammunition – called bolt – is stored in these oblong boxes, called clips. I only have three pink ones, two orange, and one cyan, but Harry has many more of them. The orange ones are explosive, and the pink ones are specially designed to be particularly effective against vampires and werewolves. The cyan one contains bolts full of acid."

"Ouch." the twins said in unison, wincing at the same time.

"We still can't see a thing." Ron commented practically.

"First, we won't have to see anything when they will reach the door. We will only have to fire explosive ammunition in their general direction. And, second, Harry has lent me a book with interesting spells. Watch." she finished, before casting a particular spell on the weapon. The air above the weapon shimmered, and a four-square-inch area cleared, showing a clear and zoomed view of what was in front of the weapon. Another spell later, a crosshair appeared in the middle of the area. It was red, but changed green when Hermione aimed at Ron.

“Hey!” the redhead exclaimed.

“These two spells created an imperturbable and zooming visor, and a homing capability, meaning that, once a target is "acquired", the bolt will strike it unerringly. Look.” she said, before aiming the weapon over the parapet. In her visor, they could all see shapes moving around and disturbing the manicured ground. And, upon recognizing the shapes, they paled dramatically.

“No...” Susan whispered, recoiling in shock.

“Death Eaters, Vampires, Werewolves, and a big bad snake that can only be Voldemort.” Hermione analyzed clinically. She was pale as well, but turned to her friends. “The biggest threat to us is the vampires, since they can fly. Susan, take this and aim for their heart.” she finished, before turning to the pile of equipment.

“There are only five crossbows, Hermione.” Tracey intervened. “And only the three pink clips are able to act against the vampires. I suggest that all of us summon our contact weapon, because they will try to come up here. Luna, we will need your shields to protect the shooters against spells.”

The addressed girls nodded, and the others agreed as well.

It took Susan a couple of seconds to understand how the homing spell worked, but she finally managed and started to shoot the monsters, quickly joined by Ginny, Hermione, and the twins, with Luna ready to provide defence. Since there were only three pink clips, Fred and George were wreaking havoc in the Death Eater lines by using the explosive ones.

The bolts weren't sent by magic, and the racket caused by the storm prevented the Death Eaters to hear the snapping sound of the crossbows firing – Hermione would have Silenced them, otherwise. Therefore, it took several minutes, and many deaths in the ranks of the Dark Lord's army, before someone found about the students' interference. One of the vampires eventually noticed the angle of

impact of the bolt and he screamed to his brethren to follow him. Five heard and obeyed, and, despite a couple of them disintegrating because of the pink bolts, they finally approached the group of teens.

The four vampires were stunned to see that it was mere teenagers putting up such a resistance, and their wait caused another one of them to be struck by the specific ammunition. They finally lunged forward, only to find that the crossbow-wielding teens had dropped the infamous weapon and were equally equipped in contact weapons than the two others. One of the vampires tried to attack Tracey, but Ron attacked him from behind and his tashi succeeded in lopping the vampire's head off.

Of the two last vampires, one got into a tremendous fight with the other students. Several weapons of the teenagers' arsenal weren't cutting, and the vampire succeeded in breaking a few, before being decapitated with Ron's long sword again. The last vampire recoiled and jumped off the roof, intending to warn the Dark Lord of the location of the resisting team. He didn't go far, though, as the sharpshooters took their crossbows again and fired. That particular vampire felt three bolts entering his body, followed by two more, of a different colour. The monster exploded in a display that shocked enemies and allies alike.

The remaining Death Eaters started to step back, thinking that they weren't ready to fight a sorcerer able to cast such powerful explosion curses without the telltale ray of light. When the most fearful started to run and Apparate out from the edge of the wards, it affected the morale of the remaining ones, and, soon, most of them backed away.

"Cowardsss!" the Dark Lord hissed, fully intending to punish them to the highest extent, as soon as his job here was done.

By now, the rocket-propelled grenade launcher – courtesy of the General – had finished destroying the door, and he slithered through after the demons. Despite having been frightened by the powerful explosions and the vampires' dying wails, the teachers were there – although they had retreated in each of the hall's exits, taking cover where they could.

“ So, Dumbledore, it seems we meet again.” Voldemort said, addressing his old archenemy.

“You do not belong here, Tom.” the old mage intoned, and several spells flew, heading towards the Dark Lord and his two demonic allies, and the three of them merely batted the spells away.

Soon, the remaining Death Eaters entered behind the Dark Lord, followed by the werewolves, and a full-scaled battle erupted in the hallowed halls. Hogwarts was helping the teachers by empowering their spell and weakening the adversaries’, but they were simply too many of them. One after the other, the teachers fell, their powerful magic insufficient to contain the sustained assault of magic-wielding Death Eaters and werewolves. Voldemort and Asmodai went to the place where Dumbledore was, a smirk on their face.

“Ready to die, Dumbledore?”

“ I’m ready, Tom. You rejected it, but death is but the next adventure.”

“I’m not the adventurous type, old man. And don’t call me by that accurssed name! Do I look like a muggle to you? Do I even look human?”

The old Headmaster shook his head. “That’s it, Tom. You aren’t human anymore. You now fall under the Beast’s jurisdiction.”

“No! That’s not what I meant!”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m a god, now! A god!” Voldemort exclaimed, ignoring the wince from his allied demons and the worried glance Snape sent his way. “And I decide when it’s time for you to leave... to your next great adventure. You’ll be disappointed, though.” he finished, motioning Asmodai forward.

“Why so?” Dumbledore asked, genuinely curious.

“Before you depart, you ought to know that this sword of Asmodai reaps the souls and sends them straight to hell.”

The archdemon took this as his cue, and slowly lifted his sword, as if it was an executioner's axe.

“NO!” a young voice yelled from the entrance. “Accio Sword!”

Due to the unnatural position of the weapon – a sword wasn't generally used as an axe – the demon's grasp had been quite inadequate, and it was ripped off his hands. The unholy sword flew towards the destroyed door, but it didn't reach the figure standing there: it was bodily stopped by a couple of unhappy Death Eaters who happened to stand dumbly on its path.

The figure itself surprised the assembled people there. It was a mere teenage boy, and he was braving the Dark Lord's army?

The boy slowly lowered his hand, and the assembled people could see that he was quite exhausted. Most of them surmised that it was only because of the sword. They didn't know that the boy had already spent three days fighting dangerous creatures non-stop.

“That was impresssive, boy.” Voldemort commented. “But that wasss alssso vassstly ssstupid.”

Harry focused on his link with Tracey. As soon as he had reached the grounds, he had felt her and their friends, and he knew that they had landed next to the entrance as soon as the entirety of the Dark Lord's army had entered the castle itself. ‘Anchor Silence spell on the pink bolts, then fire at the werewolves.’ he sent her.

“Are you sure?” he then asked the Dark Lord. “It seems to me that it was the sensible thing to do.” he continued, aware that bolts were flying past him and into the werewolves holding the teachers prisoner. Said werewolves died in painful – but, thankfully, silent – screams. Still talking, he kept Voldemort's attention from his shooting friends

and the Dark Lord's dying allies. "After all, you were ready to off my dear Headmaster, so I really couldn't let you proceed."

"Who are you, boy? My little spies didn't inform me that a student was that foolhardy to dare face me."

"Your spies... pah! They are nothing more than a bunch of sycophants convinced of the superiority of their blood. I'm sure a couple of muggleborns could show them the true meaning of power."

"You know nothing about power! Avada Kedavra!"

Harry ducked the spell, knowing that the Dark Lord's tallness would make the green ray impact the ground behind him before it could reach one of his friends. At the same time, though, he perceived a thought from Tracey. 'The crossbows aren't working anymore!'

His attention still on the ongoing fight, he swore internally. The Duplication charm must have worn off. He remembered that the spell was keyed to the magic of the wielder, and, with the complexity some bolts displayed, it must have taken a large toll on his friends' magic reserve. He sent his conclusions to Tracey, knowing that she would repeat them to their friends. After all, there was no need for them to engage in a magical duel only to find that they lacked power all of a sudden.

Harry was quite exhausted physically, and his personal ward – the one warning him of the moves of people around him – hadn't been reinstated yet. When Lucius Malfoy crept around the crowded entrance hall, he didn't register him, and he was quite shocked when the man grabbed him from behind. He reacted instinctively, though, and, to counter the man's move – Lucius had been lowering his head to drink from Harry's neck – he banged his head on the man's. Taking advantage of Lucius' surprise, he summoned his wakizashi and, in a backwards thrust, pushed the blade through the man's torso.

Lucius grunted in pain and took a few steps back, dropping Harry as he went. Cursing himself verbally and reinstating his personal ward, he was quite surprised to notice two Malfoys there. One was Lucius,

whom was contemplating the child's ghost leaving his body. The other was behind Lucius, and... invisible.

‘Whatever you do, don’t fire at Lucius just now.’ he sent to Tracey.

Lucius had pulled Harry’s blade from his chest and was contemplating it. “Not bad.” he commented. “But I have absorbed more than one brat – more like hundreds – and you’ll have to do better than-”

Whatever he intended to say was lost when the second Malfoy acted. A claymore appeared out of thin air and cut the man’s head cleanly. Under the shocked gaze of everyone in the room, Lucius’ head rolled a couple of time and finished against a wall. Without the instructions from the man’s brain, his body crumbled, and ghosts began to pour out of it, dozens at a time – after all, there were means of dying where resurrection attempts would inevitably fail.

The second Malfoy appeared then, a shimmering cloth in his hand and his claymore in the other.

“Draco.” Harry acknowledged with a nod.

“Do I know you?” the addressed teen asked, before turning to his still-living father’s head.

“Draco!” it yelled, the demon’s particular brand of magic allowing him to speak despite being decapitated. “What in the nine Hells was that about? Put my head back on my body, quick, or I disown you!”

“You can’t disown me, demon. You aren’t Lucius anymore. You are but a second-rate fiend upsetting the balance in this world. Reducto!” Draco Malfoy finished, making a large hole in whatever remained of his father’s chiselled features.

“How can you be out of your dorms?” Dumbledore asked, breaking the eerie silence that had followed what was still, to the outside viewer, a patricide.

The blond teen merely shrugged. "I was out with... before the alarm and I couldn't get back in."

"Sssorry to disssturb your family happsssstance." Voldemort interrupted. "Avada Kedavra! Avada Kedavra! Avada Kedavra!"

The sickly green rays shot towards Draco, but Harry pushed the blond boy to the floor. As the Dark Lord was continuing to cast the spell, the two of them scurried away, seeking concealment in the door's shambles. It became a deadly game of hide and seek, Voldemort's curses destroying the debris behind which the boys had taken refuge.

At one point, though, the two boys were caught by a falling rafter, and Voldemort stepped forward. He then noticed, along with Harry and Draco, that the fallen beam was slowly being raised. Looking up, the Dark Lord noticed someone outside, wand raised. Tracey Davis was trying to discreetly freeing her boyfriend, but it failed as Voldemort noticed her. He uttered the Killing Curse once again.

"Noooooooo!"

Harry would never know whether the scream came from him or someone else. He would always remember the feeling of dread in his chest as the green light hurried towards his girlfriend. Something else hurried towards her, though. Or rather, someone.

Because of Harry's meddling with his mind, Marcus Flint had been Tracey's protector in Slytherin for a long time, and he was now her protector for the last time. Coincidentally, it was against a curse from Slytherin's heir. The older boy lunged at her, pushing her to the ground where she rolled. However, in doing so, Flint caught the curse intended to her and he fell on the snowy ground with a dull thump, dead.

In the meantime, Harry had finally used one of his advantages in Hogwarts: grabbing Draco, he Apparated outside, close to the wall next to the destroyed door. 'Leave.' he then sent Tracey and their friends. Despite the fright of having felt death so close to them, they

obeyed quickly, and eight owls took flight in the slowly receding snow storm. Thankfully, nobody noticed them.

Harry summoned his bow and peeked through the destroyed doorway. Finding a clear angle of attack, he let loose several arrows towards the group of Death Eaters. Noticing this, the Dark Lord yelled "He isss outssside. Get him!"

The Death Eaters seemed to be reluctantly to obey but they did anyway. Sensing their lack of motivation, Voldemort nodded at Asmodai as well. "Let'sss get him as well. That brat really annoysss me."

As the two of them left the Entrance Hall, Dumbledore looked around, quite stunned at the events. Apparently, the Dark Lord had thought that the teachers were still held down by the werewolves, but all of the wolf-like creatures were dead. They had been at the Dark Lord's mercy, but, despite his apparent exhaustion and lack of preparation, Harry had saved the day once again. Now, though, with all the Death Eaters after him, he could have problems.

"Retreat behind the banister of the second floor." he told his colleagues and employees. "You'll be able to send curses while being protected."

"Albus!" McGonagall whispered urgently. "What about... you know who?"

Dumbledore looked at her, understanding that she wasn't speaking about Voldemort but Harry. "I'll do my best, Minerva. Now, go."

The old man threw a couple of spells on himself, and, even to McGonagall's surprise, he became completely invisible. There was not even the faint outline that Disillusioned people had.

It was only when a faint "Go!" was heard that she moved, spurring her colleagues into action.

Unbeknownst to her or Dumbledore, another teacher had done the same as Dumbledore: Nicholas Flamel was already outside, watching the proceedings. Thankfully for the two invisible wizards, the snow had stopped falling. The wind was still blowing, though, making the wizards' robes billow.

In the eerie scenery, the Death Eaters were standing in a circle around four figures: Voldemort, Asmodai, Snape, and... Harry.

"Jusst who are you, boy?" the Dark Lord asked, frowning.

"I'm just a student. I'm... Harold Thomson." Harry answered, his fake personality falling into place in case Voldemort was actually entering his mind.

"Thomssson? A Hufflepuff? I thought you moved to Brazil." the Dark Lord retorted, showing a quite extensive knowledge of the school's inhabitants. "I don't think you are. Finite Incantatem! Revelio Corpore Veritas! Show yourssself!"

Harry didn't have any spell effect on himself, actually, but he found that the Dark Lord had just given him a nice opportunity to confuse him some more. Despite his tired state, he hadn't cast so many spells in these last three days, and his magic reserve was almost full. With the ease of a long practise, he quickly grew to his adult size and developed his two additional arms. His mask and cape, which hadn't left him all that time – despite having been deactivated while in the maze –, sprang up instantly, and he summoned his blades as well. As the people around him were staring, he completed his appearance by strengthening his skin as quickly as possible.

"You recognize me, now?" Harry taunted, knowing full well what would happen.

He wasn't disappointed, then, when Voldemort lifted his wand and incanted the Killing Curse. Harry was taller but that didn't prevent him from dodging quickly, and, after throwing a glance behind him, he smiled at his archenemy.

“Thanks for killing your own forces.”

“Aargh! Kill him!” the Dark Lord yelled in frustration.

Numerous rays of green light erupted from the Death Eaters' wands, aimed at Harry... who disappeared. The rays of deadly light continued on their way, and Hogwarts witnessed the largest ballet of death as numerous Death Eaters tried to jump out of the way of their comrades' curses. Of course, when people in a group tried to jump in random direction, there was a high probability of hitting each other. Several Death Eaters fell from the Killing Curse, and the remaining ones took a few steps back. Inside the circle of death, Snape had conjured a wall of ice around him, blocking the curses, and Voldemort and Asmodai had simply batted the curses away, their link with godly power allowing them to ignore the "killing" aspect of the curse.

“Where is he?” Voldemort demanded, his annoyance making his large tail hit the snowy ground repeatedly. “Where is that wretched creature? Find it, you hear me? Find it!”

Harry was still there, although he was safely hidden in the gaseous reality. He had also banished a couple weapons to their storing place, and had enlarged his katana instead. Placing himself behind the large snake, he raised his sword and prepared his next actions in his head. In as short a time he could, he appeared, struck, and disappeared.

It had been so quick that no one had actually noticed the action. Everybody turned to the suddenly hissing Dark Lord, though. On the back of the snake's body, a large gash had appeared. It was slowly healing itself, but it was clear to any onlooker that the Dark Lord was in pain.

‘Tracey, are you there?’ Harry called. ‘What clip colour do you have?’

‘I’m here... let me check... cyan! The others are empty.’

‘Good. Shoot that acid in his wounds.’

‘Wounds? I see only one.’

‘That’s here and now. Guerrilla tactics, now: stay hidden, and change position between shots.’ Harry concluded, ignoring Tracey’s mental acknowledgement as he continued to move around. A couple seconds later, a bolt embedded itself inside the wound on Voldemort’s back, and he hissed in pain at the hit, before screaming in real pain as the acid began to eat muscle and bone.

Harry was now facing the screaming Dark Lord, and he took advantage of the snake’s current predicament to repeat his previous action: appear, strike, disappear. At the same time, he noticed a grey owl flying high over the battlefield and he smiled, knowing that it was Tracey.

Suddenly, his personal ward went haywire, and, despite being still hidden in the alternate reality, he felt a danger coming from behind. He immediately lunged forward – through the Dark Lord’s scaly body – and felt that something had almost touched him. Something dreadful. From behind Voldemort, he looked and noticed that the demon inhabiting Lestranger’s body was entirely in the gaseous reality by now. Asmodai, as it appeared, was able to enter the gaseous reality around Hogwarts and move there.

It severely restricted Harry’s possibilities.

However, as it had been the case with his sword on their previous confrontation, the demon was in both the gaseous and the tangible realities. It helped Harry slightly because he could hide behind Voldemort to avoid the ominous sword.

At the same time, Tracey was continuing to aim acid bolts in Voldemort’s wounds. Despite the pain, the snake recognized the magic of Apparation going on around him and yelled to his underlings “He’sss Apparating! Block him!” The Dark Lord then grabbed something that was hanging from his neck.

A few seconds later, as Harry was escaping one of Asmodai’s thrust by hiding behind Voldemort’s body again, he felt an anti-Apparation

ward coming up. To his dismay, it didn't seem to affect the archdemon in the least. That, and Voldemort disappeared – a portkey, Harry absently reflected. He could only do one thing to escape the incoming blow: he Apparated back to the tangible reality and lunged away.

At the same time, he realized that the demon was still invisible and moving freely in the gaseous reality. Thankfully, he could still track the hellish sword's position, and he sent a burst of energy to his personal ward to be able to do so while escaping the real curses heading his way.

After his unexpected reappearance, several Death Eaters had started cursing him again. As he jumped and twisted in the air to right himself up and to escape those curses, he noticed no less than five bolts of unknown magic coming from Snape. Still keeping a part of his consciousness tracking the demon's moves, Harry Apparated out to let the lights pass through him – incidentally killing a couple of dark wizards on their way as Killing Curses went through him again. The five unknown bolts stayed around him, though. Like a depiction of electrons around an atom core he had seen with Genevieve, they were hovering around the place he was, as though they had a homing process attached to them.

Asmodai attacking again, Harry was forced to move out quickly, but, as soon as he appeared again, the five Magic Missiles struck him at the same time, and he staggered in pain. Using the last dregs of awareness he could summon, he held his katana up and barely blocked the demon's strike. His katana fell from his grasp, though, and he rolled on the snowy ground. Once again, Asmodai held his dark flaming sword up, ready for an executioner's blow on Harry's crouching form.

A woman shrieked angrily.

In a daze, Harry felt a presence storm through the castle ground and the Death Eater lines before it appeared between him and the archdemon. A ghostly and very familiar presence.

“Mum?” he whispered. Asmodai didn’t heed the ghost of Lily Potter, though, and struck.

As his blow neared the ghostly figure, a drawing appeared out of thin air and blocked the strike with a gong-like sound. The drawing cracked and disappeared, and Lily took advantage of Asmodai’s shock to draw it back again. The protection rune flashed whole again just as the demon repeated his attack. This time, Asmodai didn’t lose time in repeating his attack a third time and, as Lily was frantically trying to bring the rune up again, the sword ripped through her body.

“NO!” Harry screamed.

The demon was laughing, and everybody could notice that Lily’s smoky body was slowly absorbed by the sword, her beautiful features distorted in a grimace of pain and terror.

At the same time, the clouds parted, and the full moon showered the scene in its whitish light. Two things happened at once: the demon’s eyes were drawn to the silver orb and he froze; and a thundering sound echoed around the place. A beautiful and ethereal stag appeared from behind a slope and galloped towards the stationary fiend. Despite being in a ghostly appearance, his antlers propelled the demon in the air, and his infernal sword fell from his grasp and onto the ground, where it returned to its primary state: dirt.

The stag went to the prone and shimmering form of Lily, his appearance shifting into the human-shaped ghost of James Potter.

“Lily.” he whispered, kneeling at her side.

“James... Protect Harry.” she breathed. She wasn’t terrorized anymore, but the sword’s toll on her being had been too much and she was barely alive – as much alive a ghost could be, anyway.

“I love you.” he said as her eyes closed a last time.

“See you soon, love.” she answered, before her ghost disappeared completely. An incorporeal tear fell from James’ eyes into the ground.

Inexplicably, much later, the place would grow lilies.

James then stood up and morphed into his stag form again. He trotted between Harry and the demon, his head held high in defiance. His proud stature faltered a bit when he noticed the demon's new shape but he stayed, ready for the charge.

Unbeknownst to most until now, Lestranger's body still had the werewolf agent in it, and it had just been exacerbated by the full moon, morphing the fiend into another type of fiend: a blood-red wolf of massive proportions. With inhuman speed, it lunged forward and struck at the stag, but his attack passed through it – after all, James Potter was a ghost, and only the sum of his earlier emotions had been able to send Asmodai in the air earlier, added to the fact that the demon had been in the gaseous reality as well, a place where ghosts had more impact than the tangible one.

Since the stag was incorporeal, the demonic werewolf merely snarled at it before pouncing on Harry.

During the whole episode with the full moon, Harry had come to his senses enough to defend against the Death Eaters and... Snape. He used magic shields and swipes from his recovered katana to reflect the curses and the magic missiles. When the werewolf pounced at him from behind, though, he reacted just in time to avoid his head from being snatched off his body. That didn't prevent inches long claws from digging in his shoulder, though.

While the four-armed man was trying to keep the wolf at bay, James Potter was pacing frantically, wondering what to do to help his son. The moonlight intensified suddenly and light descended on the stag. James shuddered, and his ghostly appearance changed, and strengthened. When it was done, a proud and white animal shook his head and returned his gaze to the fighting. At the same time, a particular redhead appeared, falling out of thin air a few yards in front of a shocked Draco Malfoy.

The blond teenager had been staying close to the castle walls. He had been willing to take risks to restore his family honour, but joining

the fight now would be purely suicidal, so he had stayed where he had been hiding since escaping Voldemort. He had witnessed the Potter ghosts come through Hogwarts walls and discuss anxiously for a way to help their son – ‘their son, this creature?’ – and their efforts in doing so. And he had just witnessed an unconscious redhead appear from thin air.

Despite his aversion to anything Weasley, Malfoy dragged the redhead behind the ledge where he was hiding, before waking him up. The two of them would then watch the remaining of the fight with wide eyes.

When the stag charged again, the werewolf noticed, but, thinking that it was still intangible, the fiend didn't care about it. The stag wasn't insubstantial anymore, though, and the wolf was sent careening in the air again. The two of them started a deadly dance, and Harry was free to duel Snape and the few remaining Death Eaters. Those dark wizards he could deal with, but Snape was hitting him with spells previously unheard of. After a couple of localized ice storms, though, most of the Death Eaters were either gone or dead, and Harry was on the ground, breathing hard.

As the dark wizards moved for the kill, a couple of other wizards reacted. Seeing that Harry was really down and not faking it, Albus Dumbledore decided to cast a shield on him and a few Stunners on the dark wizards. At the same time, Nicholas Flamel decided to intervene as well. Acting on the verge of his oath, and reflecting that the demonic werewolf was surely vulnerable to silver, he transfigured the stag's antlers into the precious matter.

The battle between the two animals became one-sided after that, the wolf not healing his wounds properly anymore. Several minutes into the fight, several heavy clouds passed in front of the moon, and the two animals reverted to their normal form... sort of.

Asmodai recovered the human body of Rodolphus Lestranger, and the stag... wasn't James Potter.

“Raphael!” the demon gasped, finally understanding the reason behind the former ghost's resilience.

“Yes, Asmodai?” the archangel replied smugly. “Sorry for the wait, but, you know... the Choirs’ bureaucracy...”

The demon didn’t answer and stuck his hand in the ground again. Raphael copied the move immediately, reaching in the air instead, and both extracted their blade at the same time. While Harry and Dumbledore were defending against Snape and the two remaining Death Eaters, the two otherworldly beings fought viciously and traded blows for a time.

It was a short time, because Asmodai was tired, and his condition pushed him to take risks. In a daring sideways move, he succeeded in actually reaching Raphael’s left side. As Asmodai drew his sword back, the archangel winced and reached his injured side with his free hand.

He had thought he’d feel blood – or its equivalent – gushing from the deep wound. Instead, like what had happen to the late Malfoy elder, a ghostly cloud emerged from his body, heading towards the archdemon’s sword. A cloud in the shape of James Potter. Raphael immediately realized that (a) he wasn’t hurt in the slightest, and (b) the part of his body that was James Potter had taken the brunt of Asmodai’s attack.

As a consequence, the ghost was slowly flowing towards the infernal sword, dragged by the unholy power. If nothing was to be done, he’d be joining the lost souls there quickly.

Taking advantage of his lack of actual wound, Raphael gathered all his strength and struck at the archdemon’s neck. Asmodai was tired by his previous fight and distracted by the ghost’s absorption.

Raphael’s sword beheaded him promptly.

Once again, the demon’s sword returned to the earth. James’s ghost stopped being absorbed by it, and the ghostly man seemed to awaken, visibly shaken by the close call.

After a couple seconds, the demon's body took fire with an unearthly cry, and it was quickly incinerated, leaving only ashes on the snow.

Noticing that the spearhead of their army was gone, the last Death Eaters followed their master's example and used their portkey. Before doing so, though, Snape uttered a last spell in Harry's direction. Like the previous ones, it was an unknown incantation and Harry hastily erected a shield, trying to jump out of the way at the same time.

However, the shield was no match against the unidentified curse, and Harry felt it pass and affect him. And he screamed, before passing out because of the pain, as the molecules of his body were affected by the Disintegration spell. Thanks to his jumping aside, only the lower part of his body was affected, though. Still, his legs disappeared completely, along with a good part of his abdomen, up to the lower part of his lungs. He even lost parts of his additional arms.

With a dull thump, Harry's torso fell on the snowy ground and started to leak blood heavily. The enemies gone, everyone – including Harry's friends, a still shocked Draco Malfoy, and a wobbly Bill Weasley – converged around Harry's dying form, with the same question in their mind: how was he going to get out of that?

To be continued in next chapter: Recovery...

There were whiteout and sandstorm,
The mother who chose to storm,
And the darkness took some blows.
Where to, now? Where the wind blows.

Chapter 34 – Recovery
posted May 12th, 2006

“What can we do?” some of them exclaimed in fright, while the older ones concentrated on healing spells. They had all heard about splinching, and Harry currently equalled the worst case of Apparation accident they knew. Unfortunately, to heal a splinch of that magnitude, one had to have both halves of the body in order to heal it properly.

Seeing his son’s state and his life fading away as his blood emptied, James Potter’s ghost started to cry again. First his wife had disappeared in front of him, and now his son was dying as well.

“I’d do whatever it takes.” he whispered worriedly. “Whatever it takes for you to live and enjoy life, my son.”

Raphael heard that, and, despite the fact that he was straining his healing powers merely to keep the boy alive – he had much power in that regard, but he hadn’t kept all of them when he had chosen to inhabit James Potter’s ghostly animagus shape –, his mind worked on the ghost’s words and meaning.

After a couple seconds, he turned to him. “Do you really mean this?”

James turned his wide and teary eyes to him and nodded.

“I might have a way, then.” Raphael continued, refocusing his eyes on Harry. “But you will have to give something away.”

“I don’t care.”

“Your life on this earth... well, whatever is left of it. You won’t be able to interact with them... him... anymore.”

“I don’t care.”

“You see, there’s a balance of lives to keep, and there are times where even the greatest healers can’t save anyone.” Raphael explained.

“Are you deaf?” the ghost exclaimed. “I don’t care about myself! All I care about is him and I want him to live.” A pause. “Besides, if I leave, I’ll see Lily again.” he finished in a whisper.

“Very well.” the archangel said, and he stopped the active healing on Harry’s body, which twitched uncomfortably. “You have a couple seconds.”

James nodded and turned to Harry. “I’m proud of you, son. Live long, and be happy.”

Even before the ghost had started to speak, Raphael had started to incant. When James became silent, the incantation grew in power, the words uttered in an angelic voice, and it was such a beautiful sound that the others stopped whatever they did, mesmerized by it. James Potter’s disembodied body shimmered and seemed to be split, one shape ascending through the clouds while the other fell onto Harry. When Raphael’s chant intensified, the audience fell into a blissful doze, unaware of Harry’s body being healed. Given the extensive nature of the damage, though, the archangel couldn’t repair all of the damage that had been sustained. The gaping wound clotted itself, and the heart restarted pumping blood in the diminished body.

“My enemy is down, and my task is done, now.” Raphael whispered. “I am sorry to leave you deal with yours on your own, Harry.”

And, in a flutter of light, the celestial being followed James Potter heavenwards.

A fortnight later...

Harry stirred in his bed, his consciousness having finally healed the near-death-experience-related damage in his mind. After a while, he opened his eyes and noticed that it was dark outside... and inside the room he was in, too. The feel of the crisp bed sheets and a quick look around told him that he was in Hogwarts’ infirmary, although it was the Professors’ wing.

He also had the pleasant surprise of finding Tracey sleeping on the bed next to him. Thinking about her, Harry remembered that she had talked to him earlier, physically and mentally. He hadn't been able to answer then, but he envisioned a later time where he could thank her properly. When the two of them would be alone and in a location of their choosing.

Well... his other friends had helped as well, but none was as devoted to him as Tracey was. Susan had wanted to help and stay as well, but she didn't have the same mental powers, and Dumbledore had already pushed Madam Pomfrey to her limits when allowing Tracey to sleep there.

Despite the darkness, Harry immediately noticed that something was wrong and was quite distraught to notice that he only had half a body. He still had his four arms, but only one of them was complete – the other three had been caught when he had jumped diagonally to escape Snape's spell.

Harry checked his mind but, apart from the normal lack of signals from the missing parts of his body, nothing was amiss. Additionally, his forced rest had allowed his remagic reserve to replenish, and it was full again. Deciding that he'd better start at the earliest convenience, he started to repair himself slowly, reconstructing bones, organs, muscles and skin – due to his habit of morphing into alternative human shapes, he knew how all his missing organs functioned, and it allowed him to create fully functional parts.

While not being painful, the process was quite uncomfortable, and he allowed himself a pause after finishing his abdomen. Another couple of hours later, as the sun was striking the highest windows, he had finished his main limbs – his two legs and his two normal arms – and was considering standing up to test them, but a rustle in an adjoining room made him reconsider.

He was still feeble physically anyway – he felt as a newborn colt – and decided to lie down and play innocent for the moment. It was only Madam Pomfrey, though, up at dawn for her morning rounds. When she arrived at his side, he opened his eyes and talked.

“Hello.”

Well... he had tried, but only a rasping sound echoed from his unused voice box. It startled the hospital matron, though, and it was a sight to see the usually calm and collected woman jump and squeak in fright. She quickly retrieved her wits, though, her Mediwitch training coming to the fore. She took a better look at him and started to wonder.

“You should get Headmaster Dumbledore.” a young voice said from behind her. Tracey had been awakened by Pomfrey’s peep and she was now standing and looking at Harry fondly.

The woman nodded absently and, after a second glance at Harry’s covers – visibly covering a complete body – she left the room towards the infirmary’s fireplace.

Tracey turned to Harry as soon as she had left the private wing. “Are you alright?” she asked.

‘I need water.’ Harry sent mentally.

‘Sure you can digest it?’ she replied as she was moving towards the sinks.

‘We’ll see. Thanks.’ he conveyed with his gratitude as she helped him drink.

‘Are you done with your... reconstruction?’

‘I think I am. I should check, though.’

‘How can you do that?’

‘I could compare with a fellow human being – a male one’ he sent the last part as Tracey was going to suggest herself, and she blushed. ‘But, since I’m here, I’ll ask Madam Pomfrey to run an examination on me.’ He frowned. ‘What does she know?’

‘Nothing. You don’t look like Henry Evans right now. Dumbledore had transfigured your mask into an ugly human face.’

‘Ugly?’

‘Yes... you don’t look like my favourite boyfriend right now, you know.’

‘Your favourite boyfriend? Am I not the only one?’ Harry asked indignantly, before catching on the joking nature of the comment.

After laughing at this, he restored the mask to its proper state and lifted it, before morphing his face so that it was his own. ‘Better?’

‘Much.’

A pause.

‘Anything else?’ he asked.

‘Oh, yes... I almost forgot; Dumbledore got another Metamorphmagus run the Defence class for a few days to confound the few students who could have made the link.’

‘Tonks?’ He paused, and she nodded, but he didn’t see it. ‘A few days? How long was I here? And what happened?’

‘Two weeks. You were hit with the last spell, as they were all fleeing. The adults tried to heal you but it was too difficult. I know you noticed the depth of the damage. Your father... he made a deal with Raphael.’

‘What kind of deal?’ Harry asked, a little afraid.

‘I’m sorry, Harry. He followed your mother.’

Large tears formed in Harry's eyes after this. He cried on his parents who died twice to protect him. Tracey hugged him, gently stroking his hair. And it was in that position that Pomfrey found them.

"What do you think you are doing?" she demanded.

"Now, now, Poppy..." Albus Dumbledore had followed the portly matron and he smiled at the couple. "There's no need to go ballistic. I'm sure you have seen teenagers hugging before."

"Not in my wing, no." Pomfrey answered curtly, causing everyone to look around uncomfortably. Oblivious of the change of atmosphere, the woman went to the bed side and started to cast several diagnostic charms.

"Can I discuss with your young charge for a moment?" the old man asked after a moment.

"I'm not stopping you." she answered, before looked at him suspiciously. "You don't want me around?"

"Poppy... you know what this is about..."

"Fine! See if I care!" she exclaimed, before leaving the room in a huff.

'PMS, much?' Harry sent Tracey humorously. Given Dumbledore's amused gaze, he was sure that he had caught the message as well.

As soon as the door to her quarters closed, the old man threw a Privacy charm around them and the three of them started laughing.

"I don't remember seeing her like that before." Harry commented when they were calmed.

"Poppy doesn't like being overstepped by the students," Dumbledore started to answer, "and young Tracey had made quite the scene to stay at your side."

Harry didn't answer, squeezing his girlfriend's hand and sending his feelings instead of speaking – in a more private fashion than his earlier comment about Madam Pomfrey's state: no need to broadcast these emotions, especially when a powerful Legilimens was in the room.

After a couple of minutes of silence, he spoke again. "You wanted to discuss, sir?"

"Yes, my dear boy. Once again, you saved the day, although Tracey told me about your friends' part in it. I thanked them – privately, mind you – and wanted to do the same with you."

"It's nothing, really."

"It is not nothing! We were close to a total defeat, and, when the tide turned, we found that almost no one had been killed."

"Almost? What do you mean?" Harry asked, dreading the answer.

"While there were many dead Death Eaters, dead werewolves, and ashen remains of vampires staying afterwards, our ranks suffered only two casualties. You know about Mr Flint, but I'm sorry to say that Madam Hooch didn't survive her wounds, too."

A pause ensued, during which Harry used all his self-control and Tracey's calming influence not to throw a fit of self-inflicted guilt about it.

"It seems that Voldemort's orders have been to keep us alive." Dumbledore continued. "I can only guess that he wanted to gloat afterwards. Or bend us to his will. Otherwise, we would all be dead at this point. The fight was quite violent."

Another pause followed.

"I would also like to know if you were fine." the Headmaster asked.

Harry checked himself again, but very few discrepancies could be found with his usual state. "I'm fine, sir. I'm sorry..."

"Are you sorry to be fine, Harry? You know you can call me Albus, by the way."

"No! It's just that... you'll have to make me another Phoenix ring... again."

"It's not a problem." the man answered, taking one from his pocket and handing it to him. In front of Harry's surprised expression, he chuckled lightly. "I already noticed that it had disappeared." The chuckles were cut short as he frowned. "Nasty spell, by the way. I wonder where Severus got it."

"Albus... you do know he's not Snape anymore, do you?"

"Ah, well. Let's just hope that this particular demon won't be as tough as Lestrage was."

"Yeah..." Harry answered absently, thinking about the damage the infamous brothers had brought upon the wizarding world over the years. His eyes shot up when the Headmaster cleared his throat. "Yes?"

"As I said, you appeared to save the day, but you seemed tired already. Can you tell us why?"

Harry nodded, and he started to tell the story of finding Voldemort's hideout and his subsequent difficulties with the Eye of Ra. He also elaborated on his decisions in the battle against Voldemort.

When Dumbledore left afterwards, Tracey was asleep on Harry's shoulder and he was weary as well. His last thoughts before falling into unconsciousness were about Snape's last attack.

He spent a good part of the daytime sleeping, and dreaming. When he awoke, it was the evening, and he scratched his head, remembering a particular dream. It had been about Snape and

Copycat. Or, more specifically, Snape's last spell and Copycat's last messages.

Since it was the weekend already, he decided to address the issue immediately, and, after using Cassie's willing help to call for an owl, he sent a letter to his cousin Alison. Since he spent two weeks without meeting his family and remote friends, he also used the magic notepads to catch up.

And, this done, he went to Venice. As usual, Leonardo welcomed him with open arms. Despite being surprised at hearing that Harry lost the Knighthood's ring again, he made another without complaint. The two of them then spent a few hours discussing about the events leading to Harry's loss of said ring, as well as the Knights' training.

Since the start of the year, Harry had been repeating each of his days at least twice, using his second time around to visit friends in remote places – and training with Goken. The mornings of that second time around, he had been teaching the Venetian Knights advanced physical combat and magical fighting, the latter involving duelling and tactics while the former included weapons and empty-handed techniques.

Said education had been going quite well, and, despite not having been warned about Harry's disappearance, the Venetian knights were now sufficiently advanced in their training to spend the time allotted to their course in rehearsal of the moves they had learnt.

The city defenders weren't as weak as they were before, by now, and Harry knew that any invading Death Eater would be in for a surprise – even though he didn't actually want Voldemort's forces to invade the city again.

After the weekend, Harry was ready to resume his interrupted teaching, and he did so with gusto, launching himself in a project that he thought was important: Occlumency. The students were surprised to spend most of their Defence periods in meditation, but it was the easiest way for him to help them build mental defences: one after the other, he went into their mind, and then taught them how to go there as well, how to manage their memories, how to conjure building material, and how to start building.

The results were varied, as some thought the sorting of their memories more important than protection itself, while others were more interested in building a beautiful castle. Some had weird ideas as well: one of the Gryffindor muggleborns, having read about Elves in novels and role-playing games, thought about building a whole forest in his mind. Since it was original and eventually workable as mind defences, Harry decided to give him extra credit as soon as the student's mind would be adequately protected.

As days flew by, Harry checked the students' defences, and he eventually asked Dumbledore to test these with his own Legilimency – discreetly, mind you: it wouldn't be productive to tell the students that they were now able to lie to their Headmaster. Needless to say, the old man was quite surprised of the students' progress and their various means of defence, and he invited Harry to his office to congratulate him about it.

After speaking about teaching and students for an hour, the topic of their talk moved to Quidditch and the upcoming game pitting Ravenclaw and Slytherin.

Madam Hooch being dead, Dumbledore had initially thought about restarting the arduous mid-year recruitment process, when a spontaneous candidate had showed up: Bill.

After the battle with Voldemort, Bill had stayed a few hours in the infirmary before being released with a clean bill of health. The redhead had been greeted by his parents and numerous siblings, and, since he was still on leave from his former job, he had offered to replace the flying instructor until the end of year.

Harry and Dumbledore also talked about a more unsavoury subject: Voldemort. No one had heard about the Dark Lord since his defeat at Hogwarts, and the two of them could only suppose that he was laying low for the moment, licking his wounds somehow.

Harry had tried returning to the accursed temple, but, because the Fidelius had been re-established after the sandstorm, he hadn't been able to find the entrance again. On top of that, no Death Eater had

come outside, and he had returned to Hogwarts disappointed at having lost a whole afternoon in the empty ruins.

Since Dumbledore had customized Hogwarts' largest wards – those including Hogsmeade and a couple of miles of forest around the castle – with a filtering charm against magical communication, they also knew that no information had travelled to or from the junior Death Eaters.

More days flew by, and several things happened out of the ordinary.

Flamel spent an evening with Harry, and the two of them discussed for hours. Now, that wasn't extraordinary in itself, but the two of them discussed potions. Harry had asked his mentor to identify the numerous vials still in his enlarged trunk – those which belonged to Lucius Malfoy at some point. The man had agreed... to teach him how that was done.

In fact, comparatively to the centuries-old man, Harry was desperately uneducated in that particular field – having barely kept his pace until second year. For a long time, they talked about ingredients and cauldrons, about stirring and grinding methods, and about dosages and effects. Flamel offered a few memories at each time, but it was only a select few – he didn't want his apprentice not to have to work.

In the end, Harry correctly identified a dozen potions, while the others were too exotic for him to even grasp their use. They couldn't even take the labels in consideration since even the most common potions were incorrectly tagged. Of these unknown, Flamel identified another dozen and deemed several of the remaining ones unusable. Some potions were either too complex or – after a preliminary inspection – their ingredients too poisonous to even inspect them closely, and they didn't even know whether they were ointments or draughts to begin with.

Another thing out of the ordinary came as Harry was teaching the Gryffindor and Slytherin third years. While the students were exchanging hexes, he was absently reflecting about one of them. Draco Malfoy. Having killed his demon of a father, the boy seemed

even more loyal to the Light, even if he hadn't said anything about that to his Housemates. Some of them were still mourning Flint, but others mourned their Dark Lord's failure. Since no one had informed the students about his participation in the battle, Draco knew he was safe from retribution from his former friends. For the moment. Only the Death Eaters knew, and Dumbledore's new wards concerning the communications were able to block anything untoward in their messages. He knew, though, that it was only a matter of time before his dark-aligned housemates would get back to him.

In the meantime, said housemates had been growing restless, and one of them even went overboard at that particular Defence lesson. Heedless to the fact that he went to none of the fighting clubs, Theodore Nott took Harry's challenge and defied him in a swordfight duel.

The Slytherin knew about his teacher's habit of organizing such events as an exhibition but he didn't want his skills to be displayed. Internally, he didn't want the public humiliation of a loss either. He asked for it to be private and Harry agreed to organize the duel the same evening, keeping the attendance to the minimum: one judge, and one witness for each of them.

Not knowing about Malfoy's defection, Nott chose the blond boy to second him, while Harry chose Flamel – he had wanted to take Tracey, but had quickly realized that it would blow part of his cover. And Dumbledore was judge.

The first match was almost a laugh, as Harry parried the boy's lunge, before disarming him and then pinning him with the tip of his katana.

Nott immediately asked for a rematch, and he selected another weapon from the trunk he had dragged there. Instead of a heavy claymore, it was a rapier. The Slytherin's eyes glinted for a moment, but, since his courses in Occlumency, Harry couldn't grab the students' peripheral thoughts anymore and he didn't know what it was about. Not liking it, he prepared himself for entering the boy's mind forcefully when a mental shout solved the issue.

‘Poison!’

Harry looked around and noticed Malfoy looking at him intently. After glancing at Nott appraisingly and noticing how the boy was refraining from even touching his own blade, Harry sent a small nod to the blond boy, who visibly relaxed.

It was only to worry again when Harry changed weapon as well. Since the Slytherin used such an underhanded move, Harry wanted to humiliate him completely, and, since he had appraised the boy's skill in the first go, he knew what to do. He magically sent his katana to its resting place and took something in his pocket. Applying a bit of Transfiguration on an innocent Sickle, he found himself with... a spoon.

Nott hesitated, his gaze going from the spoon to Dumbledore and Flamel, but the old men, after frowning for a bit, nodded their acceptance of the improvised weapon – Harry had taken care of informing them of his plan.

With a shout, Theodore Nott charged to his Defence teacher, only to see his blade pushed to the side by the man's spoon. He tried all the moves in his repertoire, even inventing others on the fly, but all his attempts were thwarted by the offending item of silverware.

After a few minutes, Harry used the spoon to strike a nerve on the boy's shoulder, and it became slack, the rapier falling to the ground with a clattering sound. Nott was shocked that it was even possible, and he didn't react when Harry grabbed the fallen sword. However, he noticed very well when said sword approached him.

"Do you yield?" Harry asked, approaching the rapier's tip from the boy's throat.

Nott paled suddenly, his eyes bulging. "Put that away!" he exclaimed, retreating frantically and trying to put as much space as possible between the blade and himself.

"Why are you so afraid?" Harry asked, continuing to approach the boy. "Hasn't it been blunted by the duel's rules or what?"

“No...” Nott was at a loss for words, and was eventually pushed against a wall. “No! It’s... Please!”

While keeping the pointy blade a few inches from the boy, Harry approached the frightened boy and spoke in a whisper. “Is it because the blade is poisoned?”

“Yes!” Nott answered. “Yes! Please...”

Harry said nothing for a while, before stepping back and looking at Dumbledore. “You heard everything, Headmaster?”

If that was possible, Nott’s face went even paler.

“I heard everything, Henry.” the old man said sadly. “I hoped that Mr Nott would see the errors in his ways, but it doesn’t seem that he did.”

“Didn’t he belong to the students put on probation earlier this year?” Harry asked again.

“Yes, indeed.” Dumbledore confirmed, before standing up. “Mr Nott!” he exclaimed with authority. “You are henceforth expelled from Hogwarts’ School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. You will relinquish your wand and it will be snapped. Do you have something to add?”

The boy was terrified that all of this was happening, but he was also incensed about it. “The Dark Lord will rule soon, and it will be the end of you all!”

“Ah, yes.” Harry said, lifting the sword and thus reminding the boy that he was there with a poisoned blade. “Voldemort.” he added, noticing the flinch from Nott. “Well, it happens that your self-appointed half-blood of a dark lord and his army failed to take this castle. I wonder if your empty threats mean anything to anyone but you. Headmaster?” Harry half-turned towards the old man while keeping an eye on the wayward teen.

“Yes?”

“I suggest that Mr Nott be kept in the castle, isolated until his parents come forward to take him. It just wouldn't do to release a young boy in the harsh world.”

“It is a most interesting idea, Henry. Nicholas, would you accompany Mr Nott to the dungeons so that he grabs his stuff? The two of you will then join me in my office.”

‘Beware of portkeys in his possessions, too.’ Harry mentally sent his mentor. ‘In fact, you shouldn't touch or let him touch any of his possessions. And Silence him too, so that he can't give information to his friends.’

Flamel nodded to both the Headmaster's words and Harry's thoughts, and, after he grabbed the condemned boy's shoulder, the two of them exited the room.

Harry turned to Malfoy. “Thank you.”

The blond boy... blushed? “It's nothing. In fact, it's better to take him out now. He wanted to plant magical bombs in the school but Bill said...” he paused, reddening even more. “I mean... Professor Weasley. He told me to either take it to one of you or "persuade" him to do something else before, like challenging you.”

Harry and Dumbledore shared a quick glance before turning to the Malfoy heir, and Dumbledore addressed him. “Does that endanger your position in Slytherin?”

“No. Not yet.”

A pause.

“You seem to be quite close to Professor Weasley.” Dumbledore commented, his eyes twinkling in amusement.

Draco Malfoy, who had slowly recovered his usual skin tinge, blushed again. "He's flying instructor, sir. Flying helps me with my... issues. He helps." he finished meekly.

"Good." the Headmaster commented, nodding. "What would you say if we abandon this classroom and proceed to my office?"

The three of them did just that.

A dozen minutes later, the same five wizards were standing in the Headmaster's office, looking at the ghostly shapes with different expressions. Earlier, Dumbledore had used the usual Priori Incantatem spell to determine the spells the ex-Slytherin boy had cast, without finding anything untoward. He had then snapped the wand and filled the required form.

Harry had noticed the slightly smug expression Nott displayed, and, opening the boy's trunk, he had Summoned all the wands from it. Only one had come, but the spells it had revealed were quite different from Hogwarts' usual curriculum. Shapes of fellow students under the Cruciatus and the Imperius had come out, as well as a couple Memory Charms.

Nott wasn't smug anymore, and looked positively terrified. Dumbledore looked more tired than in his worst days, while the two other Professors were angry. Malfoy looked guilty, but Harry knew that it was more because he had done so before, rather than because he failed to notice his Housemate following these footsteps.

"How long?" Dumbledore finally asked.

Nott was pale. "What?"

"How long have you been casting these spells?"

"It's not me! It's not my wand, in fact! I don't know who it belongs to! I'm innocent! I was-"

"If he claims being under the Imperius, I cut his throat myself." Flamel growled, and the boy closed his mouth all of a sudden.

“I think the situation warrants truth serums.” Harry commented. “Besides, I want to know where he got the idea of those bombs and who knows about it.”

“I’m not-” Nott started, but Harry interrupted him.

“And I’m sure he won’t answer truthfully anyway. Albus?”

After a long and thoughtful pause, the addressed Professor relented and leaned to the side to fetch a vial of clear liquid from his ever-resourceful drawers. Three drops later, Nott became a blabbering machine, revealing his loyalties and accusing several other students, most of them in Slytherin.

When it was done, the four other wizards looked at Nott in various states of shock. Some of the revelations were new, and, while some others weren’t, the whole data had left them with an ominous feeling.

“Well...” Dumbledore started. “It was... informative.”

Harry snorted at the man’s choice of words. “Indeed.”

“The question is: what are we going to do now?” Flamel added.

The question restored the silence, as all of them envisioned their next course of action.

To be continued in next chapter: Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust...

So... he’s not dead yet? You see,
And he’s still showing mercy.
Let us strike a new bargain:
Will he get that spell again?

Chapter 35 – Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust
posted May 27th, 2006

In the small office, four persons were standing around a now-unconscious teenager. For them to discuss freely, they had decided to Stun him.

Dumbledore spoke first. "It now seems that several young students will have to follow Mr Nott in his fate. However, we can't really remove all these students at the same time, or it would appear suspicious."

"We could re-educate them, but it would be too noticeable for their... families." Harry said, putting his two Knuts in while wording his sentence so that Malfoy wouldn't understand its true meaning.

Said teenager, though, wasn't listening to him. He was, like them, contemplating what could be done. "If I may, Headmaster?"

"Please proceed, Draco."

"You could do with them as you did with me and store their Light-aligned memories in a pensieve before they leave. Although you would have to remove all their dark thoughts first if you want to succeed."

The three adults thought about it, and Harry nodded at Dumbledore, mentally telling him that it was a sound possibility. After all, given the boy's acts, it was that or Azkaban.

"Very well." Dumbledore said, all his illusions about self-correcting humans shattered. "Mr Malfoy, bring Miss Parkinson here first, then the others, one at a time."

Even before Malfoy left, Harry entered Nott's mind and jumped over the small defences he had helped develop, before working his way in there. As removing the boy's dark tendencies would be too conspicuous, he merely unplugged them before doing the same with his memories of dark curses. He then created a blank slab of

memories and labelled it "Light-aligned persona and acts" so that all the Light-related memories would stay in the same place – making the job of extracting them easier. Since the boy's wand had been snapped, he also added a memory about stepping on it accidentally.

When Malfoy came with Pansy, Nott was ready to go, and Dumbledore gave him his secondary wand back – it would now serve as his only wand. After sending him back to his dorm, the old man called Hanky. His trusted house-elf appeared instantly and took care of bringing the boy's trunk back as well.

A few hours afterwards, all the wayward students named by Nott – as well as a few others named by said students – were "readjusted" mentally and everyone was quite tired, especially Harry.

Just as Malfoy and Flamel were taking their leave, Harry remembered something and asked them to come to his quarters the next morning. After they agreed and left, he turned to Dumbledore.

"Albus?" he asked, almost timidly. "I did tell you the Time Turner got broken, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did, Harry." Despite the late hour and the conversation topic, the old man was as amiable as ever. "But you didn't tell the extent of the damage. Do you have the pieces?"

"Well, I was fighting, then, and I don't remember anything about pieces." Harry answered, before frowning. "Now that I think about it, it's quite strange..."

"What is it?"

"It was inside my shirt when it broke, but I didn't find any pieces sticking there when I checked. Even the chain was gone."

A contemplative pause ensued.

Dumbledore was the first to talk. "Do you think... would it be possible that your body absorbed it? Do you have a different grasp about time, now?"

"I had some power over time before, but it has faded... I think." Harry turned silent and went to check his own mind. Truth be told, he was wondering about the thing himself. He just hadn't time to check it before.

As usual, his mind defences were up-to-date. His most personal memories were protected in a half-sphere of thick metal which was buried in the earthen part of his mind's landscape. The large set representing his other memories was stored in a cube hovering above ground. And said cube was spelled to keep its inside and itself invisible. The rest of the usual landscape represented his currently displayed persona.

And the twin spirals of faded light had been stored in said cube, meaning that Harry hadn't seen them in a while.

Inspecting them brought him quite a shock as he discovered that they weren't faded anymore. The galaxy-like light was slowly turning, pulsating with a gold-hued inner light.

Harry opened his eyes wide and glanced at his Headmaster. "I... think it has done something to me."

The old man frowned. "Something bad?"

"No. I mean... I don't know. But it seems to have reinforced something I already had."

A pause followed, interrupted by Dumbledore again.

"Well, if you wanted to ask about getting a replacement, I'm sorry to say that it's not possible right now. The Ministry had only issued one for Hogwarts and the few strings I pulled told me that it wasn't possible to have another one like that. When I asked about replacing one that is broken, I got paperwork to fill, but it won't be possible to

have another one for the next six month. And that's if I give the broken pieces back, too." the old man finished, looking at Harry.

"I'm sorry, Albus, but-"

"Not to worry. We will find a way. We can still use Transfiguration, can't we?"

Harry acquiesced. After all, even if he didn't have the broken original handy, he had good memories of it. Especially after having used it so often in the past. He then stood and took his leave of the old man and his avian familiar.

Once in the privacy of his quarters, he stopped and took a few seconds to think about his options, before heading to the cage in which three silvery snakes were resting.

"Hi there." he hissed softly.

The magical animals woke slowly before looking at him. "Yes, Master?"

"I have a job for you." Harry said before pausing. When they didn't move, he continued. "I want you to roam this castle and tell me if you find anything strange."

"Anything strange, Master?" the older one asked.

"You already know how humans function as a group." Harry clarified. "What I want to know is whether someone plots harm to this community – this castle and the adjoining hamlet."

The three snakes looked at each other before nodding. "We'll do it, Master."

"Thank you." Harry replied while opening the cage door. "Please be fine, keep yourself hidden, and report to me each evening."

The three snakes slithered to the ground and were out of his quarters soon. Sighing, Harry went to his bed, and sleep claimed him promptly.

The next day, when Malfoy and Flamel came, Harry explained to the blond about having gotten access to his father's potion stash and asked him if he could help determine what the potions were for. Draco didn't know how to identify them, but he knew that his father used a registry of sorts before taking any potion from his stash. Knowing that they wouldn't identify the remaining potions without it, they organized a visit to Draco's place during the Easter holidays.

The next Saturday was Quidditch day, and almost every student went to the pitch, even the workaholic Ravenclaws. Their team was playing, after all, and there had been numerous discussions about tactics in and out of the team.

Conversely, the Slytherins had a slight advantage in the form of their Beaters' outsized shape. Crabbe and Goyle weren't only playing the Bludgers, they were also playing interference with the opposing team's moves. The two Seekers also copied the idea, and, soon, the play could be compared to a brawl worthy of professional Quidditch.

However, despite bodily blocking the chasers, the Slytherin team wasn't on par with the blue-clad players' resourcefulness, and the two lumberjacks and the Keeper had to actually commit fouls on the persons they were closest to in order to restore the balance – in the Keeper's case, it was attempting to grab the opposing Seeker each time she passed by. As Bill was the school's flying instructor, he was refereeing the game, and he noticed more than half of these fouls, though.

After an hour of play, Ravenclaw was leading by sixty points, and it was the moment the Snitch deigned to appear. Cho Chang and Draco Malfoy fought to reach it, evading Bludgers or incoming players. Most of these players were Slytherins aiming their fouls to prevent Cho from reaching the golden ball.

That suited the Ravenclaw Chasers perfectly well, and, as the Snitch chase continued, they had time to score two more times.

However, the Slytherin Beaters' insistence finally paid off and Malfoy found himself with a comfortable advance on his opponent, advance he used to concentrate on speeding towards the fluttering object.

Ten seconds later, he closed his fist around it just as a last throw from Ravenclaw passed Slytherins' hoops.

"And it's a win for the Snakes." Lee Jordan commented – a lot less lively than when it was Gryffindor winning. "360 to 310. Congratulations to both teams, it was a good match."

In the weeks before his appointment with Flamel and Malfoy, Harry did several things on top of his teaching occupation.

His first activity was to refine his powers over Time. He found out that, once again, he was able to slow time efficiently, to the point of almost stopping it. Since he had used a Time Turner for a long time, he had other ideas about Time manipulations, but he knew that, first of all, he had to learn how to use his powers fully. If he messed up...

Harry also took some time to repair his friends' weapons or buy new ones. Since they had fought valiantly in the defence of Hogwarts, some of their weapons had been damaged or even destroyed. That implied a couple of trips to Japan, but he was quite happy to show his current home country to those of his friends who hadn't seen it yet. And to organize a mini-tournament among them and against Goken.

Another of his extracurricular activities was to exit the castle's grounds to have a chat with his electronic alter ego.

In the last days of February, he had received the answer from Alison. His cousin had had some trouble getting the information: she told him about the death of Magdalena Pietrzak, the woman who had transferred Harry to a supercomputer and back, thus creating Copycat. The woman had caught a particularly nasty version of the magical flu, and her old age hadn't helped. When the Healers had arrived, she was already dead. As the event was quite fresh in their memory, her descendants hadn't wanted Alison to nose around Professor Pietrzak's possessions. It had taken some time and much persuasion to discover that the woman had written her memoirs, and even more to actually access them. And then, some more time had

been necessary to gather the details of the spells. Alison finished her letter by telling him that he owed her. Big time.

Alongside the letter, the owl had brought a small booklet, containing all the information needed to cast the two spells. Harry wanted to discuss about this with Copycat and that's why he was turning his computer on and deploying the satellite antenna. As soon as he was online, he sent a mail to the designated address and waited. A mere couple of minutes later, he had his answer and connected to the computed whose address he had just obtained for the synchronous chat.

After a few sentences to get re-acquainted, Harry retold the battle of Hogwarts, especially Snape's last spell. He also told Copycat that Alison had found the flesh-to-electricity spell and its reverse.

Since he would finally be able to leave the digital world, Copycat was quite happy, but Harry asked him something else: a place to store a numeric version of himself.

Since Snape was able to disintegrate him, Harry didn't want to take a chance and he wanted to "save" himself. Tracey had agreed wholeheartedly on that topic, and Flamel had agreed to cast the spells. However, because he didn't know how to manage the digital space as well as Copycat, he needed his electronic alter ego to stay where he was for the moment.

However, Copycat argued that his consciousness could be duplicated, and that he could be copied into the real world, leaving only a part of himself back to manage Harry's save. Not finding a flaw there, Harry agreed. A part of Copycat's consciousness left to search a place where the flesh-to-electricity transfer and back would be optimal, and the two of them exchanged some more small talk. Less than a minute later, Copycat sent a laugh before telling him that the CERN was one of the best places and that they decided to do the transfer there. Again.

One clear night of mid-March, after a few hours of rest, Harry took Tracey and Flamel to Geneva, where Genevieve was waiting for them, yawning. The dark sky was a dead indication that the

mantelpiece clock was accurate in showing two o'clock in the morning.

Right after his chat with Copycat, Harry had used the communication notepads to ask the woman what was the best moment for their endeavour, and she had been the one to advise him to come at this ungodly hour.

With Harry dragging her in the gaseous reality alongside the two others, she led them to one of the rooms in the CERN where several computers were humming softly, as well as several stacks of equipment full of blinking lights. Harry knew that they were network routers thanks to Jorg's explanation the first time he had seen one, and he went to take a closer look.

"Here it is." Genevieve said, pointing at one of them. "The backbone's entryway." She then looked at the wall clocks, displaying time from different time zones. "It's the best time, right now. There's generally a 3-hour lull in the network traffic from 2 to 5."

"Thank you, Genni." Harry said, hugging her as if they were parting for a long time.

"Be careful, Harry." she answered. "Go slowly at first, and memorize your way carefully. It's not a one-way tunnel, now. It's a superhighway crossing."

She then took another piece of equipment from her pocket.

"What is it?" Tracey asked.

"The main router manages the whole campus." was Genevieve's answer. "Consequently, it's full. Since I have to free a port for Harry, I brought a 4-port switch to reconnect the link I'll be removing. To stay discreet."

"Thank you, again." Harry said.

“Try to come back intact.” she replied. “Without you, we won’t be able to get out without raising the alarms.”

“As a matter of fact, both of my friends here can Apparate, so I think it isn’t a problem... right?” he asked, turning to his mentor, who nodded. “See?” A pause. “But I’ll be there on time, don’t worry.”

After tweaking the router’s plugs, Genevieve opened a session on a nearby terminal, and, using Harry’s indication, connected to Copycat’s current machine of residence – another Connection Machine, incidentally: these beasts work best for neural networks. As soon as the electronic entity sent the all-clear, Flamel waved his wand to cast the spell.

“Digitalum morphare humanum subit ducere flux.”

As the last time that particular spell had been used, Harry was slowly transformed into a living bolt of electricity. Unbeknownst to everyone, Flamel’s power and focus was much higher than the late Professor Pietrzak’s. Harry would later recognize that it was why he kept most of his power over time.

For obvious reasons, the spell took a longer time to treat his head than the rest of his body. When it was finished, his robe and only garment fell to the floor in a heap. Like last time, he threw a last glance around him before putting his hand in the outlet and entering the network.

Genevieve had been accurate but for one point: he was still in a tunnel. But a very large one, with adjoining tunnels every few moments down the road.

“At last!” he heard, and whirled around, only to notice a jumbled pack of data in front of him. Despite being immobile, it had the same aspect as the other packets darting in the tunnels – it was perhaps lull time, but the network itself never slept.

The pack of data in front of him huffed, and Harry thought that it looked very much like a human expression. “I’m Copycat, you dimwit.

It has been a long time since I was human, and I kind of lost my shape.”

“What can we do?”

“Nothing here.” Copycat answered. “Follow me.”

He then darted down one of the tunnels, turning sharply at seemingly random moments. After a few times, Harry learnt that speed didn’t have anything to do with momentum there, and he turned sharply as well. At some times along the way, Copycat had to direct Harry through complicated firewalls.

After a few minutes, they landed in what could be considered a large cave, where packets were landing from adjoining tunnels.

“Where are we?” Harry asked.

“ Washington.” Copycat answered absently, before correcting himself. “Greenbelt, in fact. We are in the data storage centre for the NASA-controlled unmanned flights. In the whole world, it’s one of the largest storage spaces in one place. We could get to the military for a larger one, but I don’t think the risks outweigh the advantages.”

“Risks?”

“Oh, yes. There have been difficult times since I was... created. Times when my consciousness was separated from my memories by router failures. Power failures at some times. I learnt to scatter myself for better survival, and I’m gathering, now.” the jumbled mass of data moved, much like a human would do with an arm, to indicate the packets of data arriving in the vast cave.

“Al... right.” Harry commented. After a pause, he frowned. “Why are you gathering, now? Shouldn’t we... "scattering" instead?”

“I had a better idea.” Copycat replied. “Computer storage is flimsy – especially when we don’t own it: owners incessantly turn them down.”

“What about here?”

“I made sure that nothing untoward would happen tonight. I can't guarantee that your eventual copy would stay safe indefinitely – in this state, when you stay at one place for too long, you eventually disappear. Tonight, the whole power grid is working for us, and I cheated the allocation system, putting the Director's id on our job – he's on vacation, you know. No one will outrank us tonight.”

“How do you know?”

“A side interest of having access to all numeric data: since every employee's schedule is stored in a computer or another, I know them.”

Another pause ensued, during which Harry tried to understand everything from his alter ego's words. Something was missing...

“You said you had a better idea?”

“Yes. Instead of storing your copy here, why don't you store it in real life? That way, I'll be able to become alive tonight as well. That's why I'm gathering, by the way. I'm only leaving parts here and there, as backdoors for future use.”

Harry opened his mouth to interrupt him, but Copycat was on a lead.

“By doing so, you could live two lives at the same time, instead of turning back time. And, with the mental powers I know you have, you would merge your experiences daily. Whenever you wish, in fact.”

Harry thought about it, but, once again, he couldn't find a flaw in Copycat's plan. When he told his alter ego this, the entity snorted.

“Besides taking care of reserving this storage place, I had nothing to think about. Now, are you ready?”

“What for?”

“The copy, remember? I’m going to duplicate your whole being. At the same time, I’ll copy your shell.”

“Shell?”

“Look at me! I’m a jumble of memories and consciousness. Nothing else.”

“I remember.” Harry said. “You told me that you had to remove everything unnecessary for your survival here.”

“I did, indeed.”

A pause. Nanoseconds trickled by – beings of pure electricity act faster than humans.

“I’m ready.”

“Alright. Now, do not move, do not breathe – you don’t need that, here – and stop thinking.”

“Stop thinking?” Harry asked, startled.

“Just joking. Just don’t start thinking about something important, or your double could have discrepancies about that. Nothing you can’t solve later, though.”

“Alright. I’m ready.”

And Copycat started to work.

A very long time later, three versions of Harry Potter were standing in front of CopyCat, one of them unmoving while the two others looked at each other.

“Impressive.” Harry breathed.

“Undeniably.” his double – triple? – answered.

Harry looked around. He had been copied before, and he knew that, if his visual perception of the digital cave hadn't changed, he was the original Harry. Since he hadn't moved during the copy operation, he was the original. His double had thought the same thing, and he coughed discreetly.

"I guess I can't go as Harry Potter." he said dejectedly.

"Oh, you can." Harry answered smugly. "After all, I go as Henry Evans all the time."

"It is really a difficult psychological case." Copycat commented, before taking an airy voice. "Me, myself, and I had this conversation, Doctor..." he trailed off with a grin, and the two others laughed.

"Alright. But I need a name for myself, now." A short pause. "Call me Ryan. It's quite the opposite of Harry."

"Nice to meet you, Ryan." Harry and Copycat said at the same time, and the three of them laughed again.

That's when Harry noticed something. "That's the shell?" he asked, pointing at the immobile version of himself.

Copycat nodded. "I think it's time for me to start piling data into it." he said, indicating the whole room. As a matter of fact, the flow of data had slowly diminished, and the trickle Harry and Ryan had seen when they had awoken had now stopped.

"Need help?" the digitized humans asked at the same time.

"In fact," Copycat began, casting a glance at the tunnel leading to the computer's clock, "I think it's time for Harry to leave. It has been a couple of hours already. It's alright if I get some help, though. Ryan?"

"Alright." Harry's double acquiesced.

"You remember the way, Harry?"

The original Harry nodded as well, before hugging his copies. "Take care. See you on the other side."

"See you there."

Harry left, and ran through the tunnels until he found the one through which he had arrived first. He pushed himself through the disconnect plug, and landed in the heap of electricity in the middle of three surprised human beings.

Flamel recovered his cool quickly, and cast the reverse spell.

"Digitalum morphare ducere flux subit humanum." he incanted, waving his wand in the appropriate pattern.

Under their gaze, the electricity morphed back into Harry Potter. A very naked Harry Potter whom Flamel quickly covered with the discarded robe – of course, they had long since decided that the transfer would be done without garments or magical artefacts to limit the transfer's difficulty.

Despite the fact that she was blushing, Tracey lunged at Harry. "Are you alright? Everything went well? Are you- hmmph!"

Her plea was interrupted by a pair of lips pressing against hers. Harry had kissed her before, and this time was no different – bar the fact that he was sitting on the floor, butt-naked.

He smiled at her. "I'm alright. Everything went well." He looked around, before focusing on Flamel, frowning. "Although Copycat had a couple of interesting ideas."

"What is it?" the old alchemist asked.

Harry looked at Tracey. "Promise you won't scream?"

"What is it?" she repeated the man's words.

“Make room.” he said, standing and moving away from the place he had landed. “And, Genevieve, you shouldn’t touch the router yet.”

“What do you mean? Is it- Yeeowch!” she screamed as a bolt of electricity passed near her, missing her by a mere inch – her shout had been pure reflex, not actual pain.

“Master?” Harry asked Flamel.

The old man understood immediately, and, aiming the wand again, he repeated the spell’s incantation.

While the electrical body morphed into a fleshy copy of Harry Potter, the original Harry took his wand and duplicated the robe he was still holding against him before putting it on, Flamel repeating his previous action of covering the prone body. Once again, a couple of seconds later, the body coughed and straightened up.

“Copycat?” Flamel asked.

“...or Ryan?” Harry added.

“Huh. Shall I let you guess?” the teenager replied, putting the robe on before standing next to Harry.

“My god!” Genevieve exclaimed. “You are identical!”

“Precisely.” Harry said.

“We even have the same memories.” Ryan added, with a wink to Tracey, who blushed before frowning at the unexpected thoughts.

“I think you have some explaining to do.” Flamel said.

“I think Copycat will be better to explain his reasoning. As soon as we all leave.” Harry said, before Duplicating his robe again. Not ten seconds later, another burst of coherent electrons flew from the network outlet. Flamel repeated the spell again, and the girls were

surprised to see yet another Harry Potter there. Everyone quickly realized that it was Copycat, though, because he wasn't actually able to move. At first, only twitches from the muscles, followed by random bouts of Metamorphmagus ability, indicated that the body was alive.

Harry and Ryan quickly understood that Copycat wasn't used to his brand new human shell. They nodded at each other, and entered the mind of the previously purely digital entity, before heading to the consciousness building. There, Ryan took control of the body so that it stayed whole and alive, while Harry discussed about it with Copycat.

Several minutes and a few basic memories later, Copycat was able to breathe normally and move around, and all three of them stood up, ready to leave. Genevieve finished restoring the network's previous configuration, before joining the ring of human beings getting ready for the Apparation trip back.

A dozen minutes afterwards, they were sipping coffee in the scientist's flat, and Copycat had just finished repeating his reasoning.

"There will be two of you." Tracey whispered, looking at Harry and Ryan. "Always."

"Well, we don't know for sure." Harry replied.

"That's true. I was intended to be a saved entity, you know." Ryan added. "Don't worry, I won't disturb the two of you." he finished in a lower tone of voice.

"Neither will I." Copycat added. "In fact, I hereby decide that this is not my real appearance." he said, standing with a flourish. And, under their eyes, he morphed into another version of himself, but... darker. The hair lengthened and became pitch black, and the eyes followed soon after. "And Copycat doesn't suit me anymore. I'm not a copy anymore."

"Right." Harry said. "It's time we dub you properly. What do you think of Blake? Does it sound enough like "black" for you?" he finished, smirking.

To his surprise, Copycat actually thought about it, before nodding. "Alright. Meet Blake Lenoir."

Ryan snorted. "Why not Blake Schwartz? Or Blake Black, even, for that matter?"

The newly dubbed version of Harry Potter – although quite different by now – pursed his lips and shook his head. "I think that the Black family has a doubtful background around here. And Lenoir is more... elegant."

"...despite meaning the same thing." Harry deadpanned.

"Precisely." Blake finished in the same tone.

The three Harry looked at each other before erupting in laughter. They were still snickering when they left towards Hogwarts a few minutes afterwards, Tracey and Flamel in tow.

Once in Harry's quarters, his two copies were given wands and weapons.

Since Blake was going to explore the muggle world and continue his "gathering" in the real world – he had companies to visit and shares to collect – he took the most inconspicuous magic focus: Ravenclaw's ring. He also took the wand registered to Harold Thomson, as a back-up – that particular wand was still traced by the British Ministry, after all. In the eventuality of a fight, he also took Harry's short bow and his wakizashi. And his gun: Jorg's Walther P88 was still in Harry's possession after all this time, and the ex-spy had refused to own it again.

Ryan was going to stay in the wizarding world, shadowing Harry. He took Flamel's wand for his everyday use and Merlin's wand if things got out of hand. His weapon of choice would have been Harry's, but he knew he couldn't. If he inadvertently summoned the katana-turned-staff while Harry was using it, things would get messy. And vice-versa. He thus took the closest thing to a katana: the tashi.

Deciding to train in weapons he seldom used, he also took the kusarigama and the tonfas – the metal ball chained to a sickle and the nightsticks.

After taking a Duplicated communication book each, Blake and Ryan finally took their leave, and Harry and Tracey, exhausted by the long night, fell asleep where they were: on the couch.

On the last weekend of March two things happened, although one was more important for Hogwarts students than the other. Firstly, there was a full moon going on. And, secondly, the Quidditch game pitting Hufflepuff against Slytherin happened. Strangely – or not – Hufflepuff Seeker Cedric Diggory succeeded in grasping the Snitch right before Malfoy's fingers, preventing a crushing defeat. Hufflepuff still lost, but only by a few dozen points.

The following week, on the first waking hours of Sunday, Harry was having breakfast in his quarters when he heard a knock at his door. Opening said door, he noticed Draco and Flamel there. "Right on time," he commented with good-natured sarcasm. "Enter, enter. You want some breakfast?"

"I already had some." Flamel replied.

Malfoy shrugged. "I'm not hungry."

Harry's eyes narrowed and he was ready to scold the blond about his eating habits – or lack thereof – before remembering what the boy had done during Voldemort's siege of Hogwarts.

"Alright. Since I was finished anyway. Let's go." Harry said, grabbing a small case before leading his visitors out.

The three of them took a short trip to Dumbledore's office, and, after greeting the Headmaster and his phoenix, they used the fireplace to reach Malfoy's Manor. According to the plan, the blond teenager went first so that he could deactivate the security measures on the manor's fireplace. This done, he fire-called the Headmaster's office to give the go-ahead, and the two men followed suit.

Harry recognized the place, of course, but he wordlessly followed Draco to the potion lab of the boy's late father. They discovered the potion index, together with several other potions. Using the index, they identified those, as well as the ones Harry had brought, shrunk, in the small case.

Thanks to Dumbledore's meddling with his memories, Draco was currently siding with the Light side. Consequently, he wasn't going to use darker potions there and agreed that Flamel sequester them to eventually destroy them. The other potions were interesting, but the blond boy knew that the Death Eaters could enter the manor at any time and he didn't want them to access those, so he took them in his own trunk – which he had shrunk and brought along.

Harry had caught Malfoy's thoughts about the Death Eaters, though, and, curious about them, he asked about it. Since their work with the potions was done, the blond led the two men to a closed door in the manor's entrance hall.

Harry's senses didn't pick anything behind the door. It was as though there was no room beyond. However, since he had visited Sirius' place a couple of times already, he knew about a particular kind of doors doing just that: portals. On top of that, there was a bit of sand on the floor in front of the door.

"This is a portal to Voldemort's hideout." he said, and Malfoy looked surprised before nodding fearfully.

"Don't you want to deactivate it?" Flamel asked.

"Of course!" the boy answered. "But I don't know how."

"Well... I have some ideas." the alchemist replied, extracting his wand.

'Don't!' Harry sent him mentally.

'Why?'

‘I could reach Voldemort through this.’

A pause.

‘Do you think you are ready for this?’ came Flamel’s concerned words.

‘Well... not right now, no. But I can prepare at Hogwarts and come here later. I know I can pass wards based on identity to get here.’

‘I’ll give you memories about these portals, too.’ the old man sent. ‘So that you can deactivate the portal should you be in trouble.’

‘Alright.’ Harry sent, before recoiling at the large input of data the old man was sending. ‘Gee, thanks! There’s no time like the present, isn’t there?’

‘Indeed.’ Flamel replied, before switching to speaking. “It’s not a good idea to do that right now. I’ll consult the Headmaster about this. We should go, now.” he finished, and Harry acquiesced pensively.

The two men took the Floo towards the Headmaster’s office, and, after reinstating the wards on the fireplace, Malfoy followed them a minute afterwards.

For several reasons, Harry waited for the next night to act. The first reason was that he had to comfort Tracey about his decision, and the girl fell asleep in his quarters again. The second reason was because his identical twin didn’t come back before 11pm. Ryan had spent the morning and lunch in Japan, and had returned then. Because of the time difference, it was near midnight in England when the two teenagers finished their merging of memories. Additionally, they decided that a mental link would be created between them, and that Ryan would follow him somewhere in the gaseous reality.

The third reason for going there in the wee hours of the morning was because he thought that the Death Eaters, being human beings, would be asleep at that hour. He was mostly right.

So, after gently extracting himself from Tracey's sleepy embrace, Harry Apparated to the hidden copy of his bedroom – the one he had created to take care of his Time-Turner problems. Ryan was already there, and Harry gave his twin a set of glasses. It was the same as his own, which he had taken care of Duplicating so that the two of them could see through eventual illusions.

They then prepared themselves together, bringing up masks, mantles, additional arms, and enhanced skin forward. They equipped themselves in weapons as well, taking crossbows in their additional arms and their own swords and wands in their normal ones. Finally, they threw shield charms up, readying themselves for what would be a difficult battle.

They then nodded at each other grimly, Ryan mentally wishing Harry good luck. Despite the war-machine aspect the two of them had, it was established that Ryan wouldn't appear except in direst emergency.

A second later, there was no one left in the hidden bedroom.

Harry and Ryan arrived near Malfoy Manor, and, changing their projected identity to the blond's, they entered the wards easily and soon found themselves in front of the portal.

Preparing themselves for the worst, they opened the door, only to find a mound of sand falling on them. It was so sudden that they almost cursed it, refraining at the last moment. They extracted themselves from the fallen sand and took care of silently Vanishing it – it wouldn't be good not to be able to close the door should they be overwhelmed by their foes.

Behind where the small dune had been, they only saw an empty and dark corridor, with numerous doors behind which both of them perceived no room. 'Portals.' was their shared thought.

Since the sand dune hadn't been disturbed before, they supposed that no Death Eater had had the need to access these portals, and they decided to limit the Dark Lord's options: working in separate direction, they dispelled the portals, one after the other. And they took

great care in dispelling them in a way that left the door there. If any Death Eater yanked a door open to run through it, they would have quite a surprise. Not wanting to raise suspicion right now, they recreated a dune of sand in the corridor, although they took care of not reaching the door to Malfoy's Manor – so that they could open and close it later.

As they were working in separate direction, they finally reached the corridor's ends. Ryan found another corridor while Harry found stairs heading upwards. And more sand. They conversed about it, and came to the probable conclusion that the stair was leading outside, where sand had come from, and that they shouldn't head up if they didn't want to pass the Fidelius' border – even if, being two and following each other, the one still inside could drag the other back in.

Harry left the stairwell and passed through the sand in the gaseous reality. When he reached Ryan, the two of them switched reality and Harry scanned the surroundings for magical traps. Finding none, he stepped in the other corridor.

Click.

'Darn!' Harry thought.

A laser beam appeared in the empty corridor and widened immediately. As soon as it found the shocked shape of Harry, it stopped and an ominous whirling sound followed. Then...

Then, a chaos of light and sound irrupted in the cramped corridor, all heading towards Harry. The ruckus was deafening, too loud to be recognized precisely, but Harry had already heard something like that. He immediately made the link with the automatic turret that had been firing on his house in Geneva.

He felt a couple of high-velocity bullets striking his physical protection charm, weakening it greatly, before reacting and Apparating out. The turret continued to spit hot metal for a few seconds after that, before turning silent, and its laser beam explored the corridor for a minute, before turning off as well.

Internally, Harry was swearing, cursing himself for not having checked for muggle traps as well. After all, he knew that Voldemort had contacts with muggles, and it must have been for a reason.

Their ears ringing, Harry and Ryan almost didn't heard the commotion around them. When they did, though, they swore again.

Of course, the ruckus the turret had made would have awoken anyone.

Reacting quickly, Harry and Ryan hurried to the now inactive turret and, noticing that it was a portable one, they Apparated in and turned it around. It now faced a rectangular room with four other corridors going away. It was an impressive room, with many snakes etched on the walls. Besides the torch-bearing sculptures, a green dais and an altar adorned with snakes were completing the room's decoration. The two trespassers knew that they had found one of the ritual rooms of Wadjet's temple. Perhaps the main one. They didn't know that it was the only one.

The turret-protected corridor was on the right wall from the dais, and another passageway was facing it on the opposite wall. The three other entrances were on the wall facing the dais, and Harry and Ryan had placed the turret so that all four entrances were covered by the automatic defence system. It was just in time, too, because several half-awake Death Eaters irrupted in the room. However, Ryan had already returned to the previous intersection to step on the pressure plate again, and the turret repeated its deadly dance. It took several dark wizards down before they stopped reacting like frightened chickens and acted semi-intelligently. A dozen of them thought about a physical shield but quickly noticed that the turret's firepower outweighed their magical power greatly. Only a few of them thought about Apparating to the turret itself to shut it down, only to be cut down by Ryan's sword – since the turret was in auto-acquisition mode, the four-armed wizard had come forward to secure the position.

In the meantime, Harry had taken advantage of the lack of anti-Apparation field to Apparate behind the Death Eater ranks briefly, and he only threw one spell before going to the next corridor.

“Expecto Patronum!”

Still having the possibility of displaying the identity he wanted, he produced the same solid sabre-toothed tiger as before. The Death Eaters tried to shoot spells at the magical beasts, but they quickly realized that the smilodons absorbed their magic instead of being harmed.

Taken between a rock and a hard place, the dark wizards didn't know what to do. A small number of them were acquainted with the military adrenalin-boosters the Russians had provided Voldemort with, and they used the small doses they had at hand to try to reach the machine gun, but half of them were gunned down on the way, half of the remaining ones were sliced in two by Ryan, and the remaining ones were quickly dispatched when Harry returned from his Patronus conjuring.

At that time, and despite Voldemort's conspicuous absence, the dark temple seemed to have lost the battle. However, Snape appeared at that precise moment, and his arrival changed the tide. The Archmage uttered a long and complicated spell, and the alabaster beast he had targeted stopped attacking, before going to the man's side. Having taken control of the beast, Snape sent it against the turret, where Harry and Ryan could only watch the proceedings from the gaseous reality.

‘They can be turned?’ asked Harry in shock, looking at their primary source of hot lead being dismantled rather savagely.

‘Apparently so.’ was Ryan's answer. ‘Can you recover it?’

‘I'll try.’ Harry replied before concentrating. After a minute, the beast flickered out of existence. ‘Hey!’

‘What?’ Ryan asked, worried at Harry's upset tone of voice.

‘I only received half of its energy!’

Both of them knew who got the other half when they identified Snape walking in the large room, a sphere of magic around him. Harry brought his three other tigers to attack the man, but they couldn't pass the sphere. As Snape was chanting again, Harry focused on the smilodons and they disappeared as well, their energy returning to him.

Countered by the lack of target, Snape's spell fizzled and the man looked around. The Death Eaters, still afraid by the sheer massacre in the room, were slowly exploring their surroundings. While Harry and Ryan were conversing about the next course of action, Snape cast another spell and his eyes began to glow. He looked around quickly and his gaze stopped exactly where Harry and Ryan were hiding, oblivious of this new development. The man then leaned to another Death Eater and whispered a few words, causing the man to extract his wand and to begin casting a spell himself. A spell that Snape's particular brand of magic didn't include.

An anti-Apparation ward.

'Shit.' Ryan resumed the situation, while hurling himself towards the corridor they had come from. Harry had had his back to Snape, though, and he only had time to turn around before the spell effect took place, immobilizing him in the gaseous reality.

"It seems that our little critter is here again." Snape wheezed. Apparently, Harry being in front of Ryan, Snape had seen only one of them. Especially as his version of the True Sight spell showed auras and Harry's was quite large.

It was the moment Voldemort chose to enter the room, already in a foul mood for having had his weekly sleep perturbed. "What is it?"

"We have an intruder, Lord Voldemort." Snape said, still looking at Harry's aura.

"Where?"

"Apparently, he's stuck in the place you use to Apparate."

“Apparate.” Voldemort corrected absently. “How can we make him come out?”

“According to your magical theory, spells can affect people while they Apparate, but it’s only when they come in contact with the tip of a wand. I think that, by using your wand where he is, you can make him feel your displeasure.”

Harry had heard, though, and he wasn’t really keen on feeling the effect of Voldemort’s spells. Pain wasn’t really a concern because he had disconnected that particular mental circuitry beforehand, but he didn’t want to try his chance at what the Dark Lord could do.

As Voldemort was slithering forward, he willed his crossbows into tangibility and fired. Repeatedly.

Harry had aimed at Voldemort first, and, as he didn’t want to be targeted by the Death Eaters either, he moved his hands outwards in a wide circle around him.

Orange bolts exploded, rocking the room and killing the dark wizards where they stood. Voldemort had been thrown back against the wall where he stayed, unmoving. The few Death Eaters still alive and able to act tried to throw spells at the crossbows, but they were mostly unsuccessful. Only a couple of them succeeded in hitting the moving weapons before bolts hit them or their vicinity. And, even then, the spells used weren’t ones disabling weapons and they had no effect.

Only Snape, who had taken cover as soon as the crossbows had appeared from thin air, had thought of a very interesting spell to actually block Harry. And the Fire Sphere wasn’t even such a high-level spell for the Archmage. As its name implied, it created a sphere of fire, and it just hovered around, moving to where the mage was directing it. After casting the spell, Snape sent the sphere to where Harry was still firing around, taking care of moving the thing so that it would reach Harry from behind.

However, when the fire ball struck, it cleared an even larger ring of destruction around Harry.

The fire reached the crossbows and their ammunition, and several things happened simultaneously. The duplication charm went haywire, creating several bolts on the fly. Said bolts exploded, causing the largest explosion the old room would ever experience. Of course, Harry's hands weren't spared by the magical fire: not only were they burned by the fire, they were also vaporized by the tremendous explosions.

On top of that, the fire sphere stayed where it was, preventing Harry from safely returning in the tangible reality. Despite not really feeling the pain in his secondary arms thanks to his pain circuit rewiring, Harry knew he couldn't stay where he was. He was stuck in the not-so-gaseous-anymore reality, and he couldn't escape because a fire was waiting for him.

Thinking hard about it, he decided to try something else. First, his whole body intangible, he tried to regrow his hands – successfully. Then, realizing that the anti-Apparation ward was preventing his movements but not his Metamorphmagus powers, he extended his wand arm until the hand was out of the sphere's reach. Then, while the Death Eaters were approaching the flaming ball cautiously, he returned his wand to tangibility and cast an Explosion curse on the ground, showering the onlookers with debris. Taking advantage of the commotion, he threw another spell right at the ball. A spell intended to dispel effects.

“Finite Incantatem.”

Applying enough concentration on it, he succeeded in adapting his counter-spell to the foreign magic, and the ball disappeared. The dark wizards didn't notice it immediately, though, and Harry took advantage of this to Apparate in, Disillusion himself, and Levitate himself to the 15-foot high ceiling. Then, casting a voluntarily half-baked Sticking spell on his shoes, he was able to walk on said ceiling, the spell allowing him to stick to the ceiling and move his feet around as well.

In fact, walking on a ceiling wasn't his usual way of doing things, but it had several advantages. He was already able to stay airborne with

his ability to Levitate, but it wasn't like flying, and he needed to actively focus on that, something he couldn't do in combat situations. From his past experiences with partial Animagus transformations, he also knew he was able to grow wings, but he had never tried it. Besides, with the time he had needed to be efficient with his four arms, he couldn't very well grow wings and the corresponding muscles in the short time he had. On top of that, wings able to support his weight would be much too large not to be cumbersome. So, that's why he was currently standing upside down on the ritual room's ceiling.

From his vantage point, he was able to see the crowd of dark wizards casting spells everywhere and he could also see Snape looking around with his eyes gleaming. Focusing his magic appropriately, he repeated his last dispelling Charm and had the satisfaction of seeing it succeed: the eyes of the foreign wizard stopped glowing.

It was really chaotic down there, and Harry left them hurt each other involuntarily, while dispelling the Archmage's True Sight spell each time it was up. It wasn't many: in fact, the man only cast it once more than the first, before stopping altogether. Harry didn't know it, but the man was limited in his choice of spells by the ones he had memorized beforehand. It really was another kind of magic, more powerful than his own, but more limited in versatility.

Even though Snape had finished his quota of True Sight for the day, something happened and the mage went to the background of Harry's preoccupations: Voldemort awoke.

Harry had been sure that the Dark Lord had been killed, given how his explosion bolts had impacted the scaly body. The 20-foot snake had been thrown backwards forcefully, hitting the wall behind him with the sharp sound of bones breaking. More than one follower had been caught by the serpentine body as well, but they had barely helped Voldemort in his fall. And, given the position the snake had been in, Harry had been sure that it was dead.

But no.

With the power of the goddess Wadjet, Voldemort's body had been merged with his faithful snake Nagini, and, unbeknownst to everybody, the Dark Lord's scaly body now contained two separate parts of his soul. Even in the unlikely event of someone actually succeeding in killing him, the second part allowed his body to regenerate to full health.

Voldemort reared up again, his eyes flashing in anger and his power still there, and his followers stopped acting like headless chickens.

"Who dares attacking the Dark Lord Voldemort?" he demanded, his voice echoing ominously in the now-silent room. He was staring in the corridor where a destroyed turret was standing an inefficient guard.

Harry stayed silent, wondering about his options while inspecting his equipment. He still had a spare crossbow in his belt, but the remaining clips were purple and... dark green?

Dark green was lethal poison.

Grinning, he took the clip and attached it to the weapon. He then took aim towards the unmoving snake. And fired.

The bolt travelled the short distance in record time and imbedded itself in the Dark Lord's last vulnerable point: his second and last organic eye. Not only that, but, because of the bolt's speed, it stayed stuck in the Dark Lord's eye socket, its content spreading in the snake-like body. Voldemort had already experienced having his eye shot, but, this time, the pain was another thing completely.

It was poison.

Cyanide, arsenic, highly-dosed potassium... Powell hadn't been precise about that, but, whatever was in the bolts, Harry hoped that it would be enough to damage the overgrown snake.

And it did.

Visibly, the rampaging Dark Lord wasn't dead yet, but he was in pain. His massive tail swished left and right, and his followers fled from the

ritual room and its dangers. Some didn't make it in time, though, and they were slammed against the floor and walls. Sickening sounds came from everywhere but it didn't help Voldemort's ordeal.

One man had had the presence of mind to notice the sound of the crossbow firing and to hide from the Dark Lord's convulsions. Snape looked up, and, despite not exactly seeing Harry there, he could focus and distinguish a blurry shape with four arms. As discreetly as possible, he started to incant, and, his spell complete, he released it.

“NOOOOOOOOOO!”

Once again, several things happened at the same time. Another four-armed – although not blurry – shape jumped, bypassed the squirming snake, and lunged forward, pouncing into Snape just as the Disintegration spell took effect. It didn't simply push the Archmage either: while charging the man, Ryan had brought his tashi forward, and he had effectively impaled the former Potion Master's body through the chest.

“Nooo! I'm immortal! You can't do this to me!” Snape yelled, coughing blood. “I am Raistlin Majere!”

However, Ryan having suffered the brunt of the destructive spell, no one was around to pay attention to the impaled man. Despite being in enormous pain, the self-called Archmage removed the blade from his chest and chanted a short sentence in a foreign language, ending it with “I wish to be completely healed, hic et nunc.”

The Wish spell being properly worded, it activated and the mage was returned to full health.

And, at the same time all this happened, the Dark Lord Voldemort had found a way to express his pain and to try to heal its body at the same time: having had memories about werewolf transformation for a long time already, the Dark Lord had modified it time after time. The last time Voldemort had changed it, it was a month ago, and his choice of beast had been inspired by books about a legendary creature: the Tarasque.

It was an enormous and supposedly invulnerable creature, and Voldemort had selected it for the massive damage it could inflict. Given the opportunity, he could have used it against structures like Hogwarts, for instance.

However, it wasn't a creature designed to fight in close quarters, and, even with its size and high ceiling, the room wasn't made to contain a Tarasque. On top of that, the transformation hadn't healed him. In fact, with its heavy hide and relatively small legs, it was impossible for the creature to reach its eye to ease the pain.

Still writhing in pain – something he wasn't used to – and needing an outlet, Voldemort charged at the slightest move, whether it was his own followers or his own shadow. The huge creature smashed stone and masonry as though it was mere plaster, and the already damaged room saw its very walls shattered. Eventually, the destruction was too much and the whole room collapsed, tons of sand falling into it from above and filling the adjoining corridors as well. Several Death Eaters were too wounded to free themselves from the collapse, and they died where they stood or were buried alive.

Only a handful would escape the whole carnage, and, eventually, as the anti-Apparition field went down due to its caster's death, they would be able to Apparate to the surface.

Snape, or Raistlin, wasn't able to Apparate: he knew how to Teleport himself, instead. However, the slashes from the large creature's tail were so fast and powerful that the surrounding blocks of masonry prevented him from fleeing. In fact, the stones and bricks falling on him prevented him from living, period. As the spirit of the famous Archmage of Krynn was going to leave its current battered body, though, the Contingency spells he had placed months before took effect.

What remained of Snape's body shimmered and dark flames licked it, the departing spirit acquiring an unholy colour in the process. It then descended into the ground, returning to his forsaken place of residence in the lower planes of Hell. Despite the horrid climate, the Archmage preferred to live there rather than dying.

In the middle of the destroyed room, surrounded by sand on all sides, the large beast that was Lord Voldemort went still. But it wasn't as a result of the tons of sand that had fallen on its back. It was something else altogether.

Tom Marvolo Riddle looked around and noticed that he was in a study room of sort. A dark one. And the perspective with which he was seeing things made him look at himself as well. And he reeled in shock.

He was human! He was himself, in fact, before all those rituals and his demise at the hands of a toddler. And he suddenly registered that he wasn't in pain anymore.

He suddenly heard hurried footsteps coming toward him and looked up, only to see a beautiful woman for half a second. A beautiful woman with few clothes on her, but a scaly skin and elongated fangs. A beautiful woman with a malevolent glare, which seemed to be an integral part of her figure.

Then, pain came back in the form of a god-awful slap across the face. Apparently, the beautiful woman packed quite a swing, and he fell on his back from the blow.

"How dare you?" she yelled. "I gave you my temple, my power, and look at what you did!"

She was pointing at a pensive-like item on a nearby desk. Riddle returned to his feet, so that he could look into it, and he quickly noticed that it showed the state of Wadjet's temple. And he understood who had just slapped him. Realizing that he was in a tight situation, he threw himself at her feet.

How he detested being forced to grovel! Hadn't he studied hard so that he'd never do that ever again? Was it all for naught? Before then, it had never crossed his mind that, whatever level you reached, there was always someone or something above you. It was humanity's fate – and probably the one of all sentient races as well – to live stooped under someone else's rule, and only a few individuals really attained freedom. The problem was that most of them attained that state by

relinquishing earthly things, a path that Voldemort wasn't ready to follow.

Shaking his thoughts, Voldemort returned to the problem at hand and tried to word an apology. "I beg your pardon, my goddess. I promise I will rebuild it. Larger, and in the open. People will flock its halls and your name will be praised again."

Her evil countenance switched into a thoughtful one, although the sneer was still present. She looked at him appraisingly for a while before answering.

"Alright. I will free you from your current state and you'll build that sanctuary to me." A pause. "It is a good thing that one of your archenemies died today."

"He's dead? Four arms and all?"

"Your ally, Majere, succeeded in Disintegrating him before taking his leave."

Having had only one "ally" at that moment, Voldemort understood that she was speaking about Snape. "I have no more important ally, then?"

She thought about it before gesturing with her left hand. A short time later, a medallion appeared and she snatched it from midair before giving it to him. "With this, you will be able to communicate efficiently with the despair demons your ancestor so aptly summoned."

It took some time for Voldemort to reach the appropriate conclusion. "The Dementors?"

"Yes. Those. Just go near one and speak while holding the medallion. As long as you hold it, they will be receptive to your ideas, and you will be able to hear their responses."

They stayed in thoughtful silence for several seconds, before the goddess returned to her usual curtness.

“I will take some of my power back, now. Since you managed to get the entirety of my worshiping places destroyed, I need it to stay alive.” Her anger returning full force, she started to yell. “Do you understand what you have just done?” she demanded, irritation radiating from her in almost palpable waves.

Tom Riddle, Dark Lord extraordinaire, was on his knees in a heartbeat, trembling in fear. He would give anything to just disappear. To leave that goddess forever. But he was tied with links stronger than blood. And, for the very first time, he understood his followers’ fear towards him.

“Leave!” Wadjet shouted, and Voldemort disappeared, the godly dismissal sending him back on Earth. Once alone, the snake goddess began to throw things around to calm herself. An hour afterwards, her anger had subsided enough for her to envision the future.

“You will do as you said, Tom Riddle.” she whispered intently, her fists clenching. “Or you will spend eternity as my poison tester.”

Down on Earth, the aforementioned Dark Lord stopped and shivered, earning himself a couple of surprised looks from the Death Eaters. A short time before, he had appeared in the middle of their disparate group with Nagini on his side, and he had taken their lead again, surprising them by his new looks.

Tom Riddle was human again.
Earlier...

Harry saw his double charging through the room but, as he was concentrating on the Dark Lord, he didn’t know why. When he noticed Snape at the end of his double’s charge, he decided to help and stopped time again.

It worked.

But it was too late already, as Ryan had disappeared almost completely, leaving only a couple of limbs behind.

Harry was quite shocked to see that his double had sacrificed himself for him, putting himself in the path of a spell he had already felt. And he was still reeling at the fact that such a disruptive spell existed.

Harry was ready to exact revenge on the former Potion Master, but he noticed the large sword protruding from the man's chest and judged that there was no need. Snape seemed to be out of the game, now – and, having already experienced what happened in a dying mind, Harry had no desire to explore Snape's. Relaxing his control over Time, Harry continued to watch Voldemort from above, dismissing the Archmage completely.

He noticed that the Dark Lord was morphing into a strong beast and prepared himself for a difficult fight. However, the beast was only hurling itself against the walls in desperate attempts to calm its pain, and the much-awaited fight didn't come. Harry decided to Summon Ryan's wands and sword before the beast trampled them, and to flee the place before it was completely destroyed.

As he progressed down the corridor with the turret, he noticed a wall that seemed to have been completely destroyed by successive Explosion curses. Remembering what had happened earlier, he reflected that it must have been where Ryan had been when the anti-Apparation field had been cast. 'That would explain why it took him so long to reach me.' he thought. It wasn't spiteful, just... weary.

Thinking about anti-Apparation field made him test the gaseous reality again. To his delight, just as an ominous sound rumbled from behind him, he felt that he could move around again. He shot upwards, then, only stopping when he noticed that he was in the ruins again, a hundred yards above the collapsing temple. Curious about the Fidelius, he went where he knew the trapped entrance had been, only to find that the Eye of Ra was now on the floor. Not wanting a repeat of last time's maze, he transfigured nearby debris into wrapping cloth and travelling case before Levitating the stone there.

While he was searching the rubble for things to transfigure in order to contain the Eye, he had found the usual debris one can find in such a place, but there were several tiny things that got his attention immediately after pocketing the box with the famous Eye.

Pieces of broken metal and glass. With a particular shape.

Harry recognized the shape and was quite satisfied to have found the pieces of the broken Time Turner. Apparently, it had broken and had an impact on himself, before falling downwards – and he remembered that his actions at that particular moment could have had his clothes torn, flowing, or both. It was for the best, too, because the Unspeakables had rejected Dumbledore's transfigured debris with the explanation that no residual Time Magic could be found on them.

Harry was distraught by his double's death. Who wouldn't be? It was himself too, down there. However, these little things he found brought a small smile to his lips. After gathering the Time Turner parts in another transfigured-debris box, he headed back to England.

Before reaching Hogwarts proper, though, he made a last stop at Malfoy Manor and dispelled the portal to the now-destroyed temple. Hogwarts, the next day...

The morning started like all mornings, until the mail came. The Daily Prophet that was delivered today was twice as thick as it usually was, and several people stopped eating to browse it in search of the reason.

It was simple.

The obituary section took more than half of the newspaper's pages. And more articles were about the massive death toll in the ranks of the "upstanding citizens of the wizarding world." The editorial from Rick Richman told the readers that it was a freshly minted edition, made hastily that very morning – "hastily but professionally nonetheless", the editor said. Apparently, more than one family had pieces of furniture in the like of Molly Weasley's clock, with alarms linked to them as well, and the Daily Prophet's editor had been receiving confirmation of several deaths in prominent families.

Hence the obituaries.

Since many of these dead people were important members of the wizarding world, several of them required a full page for the list of their many awards and accomplishments.

Hence the unusual paper's size.

Some students screamed, some cried, and some fell unconscious from the shock of reading about their family in there. Dumbledore cancelled classes for the day, and all the staff members took turns taking care of the children of those fallen.

Noticing that several of these distraught students were the same ones whom had been named by Nott during his questioning, Dumbledore had a long chat with Harry, after which he better understood the reason behind today's special publication.

And the old man was also glad to recover the missing Time Turner parts as well.

Since they were in the old man's office for that discussion, Harry took advantage of the fireplace to call Bill here as well, and he showed the Eye of Ra to the redhead. After a discussion about it, the three men opted to bring it to the Department of Mysteries, where it came from, along with the Time Turner.

The following week...

"My dear followers..." the man known as Lord Voldemort addressed the couple dozen survivors of his army and the few new recruits. "The tide may have been against us for a few moments, but we are now back on our rightful track. Since our brethrens' wills have been executed properly, their death has ultimately profited us monetarily and we will establish a new base of operations soon. Like last time, it will be a temple to our goddess Wadjet. Like last time, we will live there. Unlike last time, though, we will do it in the open. And, unlike last time as well, allies will join us there." A pause. "Dementors."

That elicited startled cries among the remaining Death Eaters. They had thought that the Dark Lord would speak about Vampires, or even Werewolves. Dementors, living nearby?

“Put your fears to rest.” Voldemort intoned. “I have spoken with them, and they agreed with my conditions. Soon, they will accompany us on our outings, and they will only affect and feed on our opponents.”

The relief in the air was almost palpable.

“Our project for the days to come will be for you to become Animaguses.”

That particular announcement caused his followers to gasp in surprise, and several voiced their earlier results in that particular venture. The Dark Lord quieted them with a raised hand, though.

“Not any Animagus either. I have the knowledge to give all of you the useful form of a snake.”

Excited chatter started afterwards, as men and women discussed of the possibilities. Voldemort had to speak louder, but, somehow, it didn't disturb him.

“I will do that with each of you, individually, and the snake species you'll be will depend on your abilities. In the meantime, you will take care of the new temple. When everything will be ready, we will strike again. This time, our opponents will bow before our might. This time, we will be victorious!”

A massive cheer saluted his talk. Well... as massive a cheer from twenty persons can be.

Hogwarts, the first Saturday of May, 11am...

The year's last Quidditch game pitting only Hogwarts students started with a bang.

The Gryffindor and Ravenclaw teams had polished their tactics, and they had been scoring continually for a few minutes when the Snitch came to view. Ron and Cho started to follow it, but the two Bludgers headed their way, hit by both teams' Beaters. Unfortunately, the two Seekers were too focused on the golden ball and their adversary to notice the two incoming balls. With an almighty crash, the two of them dropped to the Cushioned ground, followed by cries of dismay from every onlooker.

Hogwarts had adapted professional Quidditch rules to fit the friendlier aspect of student games, but the rule that the game wasn't finished until the Snitch was caught hadn't been removed, and both Ravensclaws and Gryffindors started to accumulate points while the two Seekers were healed. It took Madam Pomfrey three hours to have the two Seekers on their brooms again, and, in that time, both teams had scored twenty-odd times against the other, Gryffindor leading by only a couple of goals.

Ron and Cho were unsteady on their broom, but able to continue the game, and, as soon as the Snitch was found, they launched after it side by side. This time, not wanting to worsen the Seeker's condition, the four Beaters kept the Bludgers away by throwing them to the Chasers. After all, the game wasn't finished yet.

Since nobody disturbed the Seekers, the chase was quite long and the Ravensclaws succeeded in scoring twice, levelling the score to thirty-three goals each.

After several minutes of chasing the fluttering golden ball, Ron's longer arms proved to be an asset as he reached it before his counterpart. All players were exhausted, though, and it took all their energy to go down the pitch before crumbling in undignified heaps – three hours and a half in the air weren't keen to anyone's legs.

That evening, after a forced nap for all players, a party was thrown in the inter-house common room, and students from different houses attended. Being fair players, the Ravensclaws came as well and everybody had a blast until McGonagall came, around eleven, to shoo everyone to their respective dorms.

When Harry came to his quarters afterwards, he noticed something on his bed. Three animals, actually. His three snakes, reporting from their daily exploration. And they were quite excited. More than the times they had found passages to the hidden level in the dungeons.

“Hi. What is it?” he asked. “Is it because of Quidditch?”

“Quidditch? What’s that?” asked one of his snakes.

“ Anyways...” another interrupted, before continuing in a nonsense tone of voice. “We found our brethren in the castle, Master.”

“What do you mean, Urd?” Harry asked. He had long since learned to differentiate his snakes, using a combination of their appearance, speech patterns, and self-perceived identity.

“Today, many snakes came in the two-legs’ dwelling. Of different species, they were. They arrived when the two-legs were shouting outside, and they slithered around until the sun was at his highest. Then they left. We were hidden all the time and they didn’ t notice us.”

Harry contemplated that piece of information. “How many?” he asked, knowing that, even with their intelligence, the snakes could only give him an estimation.

“As many as your fingers, twice over, Master.”

“They weren’t true snakes, though.” said the third snake, who hadn’t spoken until now.

“What have you seen, Skuld?” Harry asked.

“They explored in groups of four, and I saw one of them transform in a two-leg. He looked at a wall and showed his teeth before turning snake again. I then knew why their smell was different than the one of true snakes.”

Harry thought about that. Twenty snake Animaguses? In the castle? That couldn't mean anything good.

"Do you remember where the one you saw transformed?" he asked the youngest snake.

"In the meal room, near the door." was the answer.

"Thank you."

Harry called for a house-elf to bring him some rare meat and gave it to his snakes as a reward. He then Apparated to the Great Hall. Besides being an oversized dining room, the Hall was also the place where school-wide notices were posted, and Harry shuddered when he noticed what had made the snake Animagus smile: the next Hogsmeade weekend was next week.

He immediately went to Dumbledore, and the two of them discussed about it into the next day.

The following Friday evening...

Dear Genevieve,

It took me quite some time, but I think I have found a way to create moving Anti-Apparation barriers instead of fixed fields, and to link them to the tangible world. And Harry showed me how he made a computer work with magic. I think we can start really working on your project, now. Since the AA-barriers can be moved wherever we want in a 50-mile radius, I also think that they can be thrown into space to gather your neutrinos directly there. Harry told me there's a kind of wind there, but you'll have to discuss about it with him.

I can't wait to see you these holidays!

Your friend,
Hermione

The Ravenclaw girl re-read the letter she had just finished, and, nodding to herself, she closed her notes and the Library books around her, returning the former to her bag and the latter to the shelves. She then hurried to the owlery to send the message. By then, it was past curfew already and she didn't wait before returning to her room. Using instincts practised when Snape was Professor, she applied a Silencing charm to her shoes and walked briskly towards Ravenclaw rooms. Since it was late, she was quite surprised to hear people nearby, and her natural curiousness was brought to the fore when she recognized Draco Malfoy's voice.

Apparently, the boy was upset about something. He was speaking about his father and about his... feelings?

Hermione tried to get closer, but she heard a mewling nearby and, not wanting Mrs Norris to direct Filch to her, she departed the place. After all, next day was a Hogsmeade weekend and she had to sleep well if she wanted to spend as much time in the local bookstore as she wanted.

The next morning, the Daily Prophet darkened the ambiance with a particular article from Rita Skeeter. Given the reporter's name, several students thought that the article wasn't accurate. Conversely, thanks to Dumbledore's earlier warning about the reporter turned spy, the staff knew that it was genuine. And the news of Voldemort breaking into Azkaban and kidnapping the hundred Dementors there brought worry into the otherwise happy day.

Despite Voldemort's last attack of Hogsmeade, most of the students didn't think that the Dark Lord could target the small town again, and they decided to spend a relaxing day there, unaware that there were more adults around than usual.

Harry was in his teen form, sipping a Butterbeer with his friends. He wasn't relaxing, though, and they quickly noticed it.

"What is it?" Tracey asked.

For the hundredth time, Harry wondered about Dumbledore's decision about not warning the students. For the hundredth time, he

wondered if he should warn his friends despite the old man's advice. Dumbledore's idea was for the children to enjoy their childhood, leaving the protection job to the adults. Harry, however, thought that his friends had already had their baptism of blood and fire, and, noticing their stare, he relented. He prepared a memory and pushed it forward, copying it into their mind.

It included almost everything, and they understood that he had promised not to warn anyone – although it wasn't an oath.

“What are we going to do?” Susan asked.

At the same time, several shouts could be heard in the street and the temperature dropped several degrees. Having encountered Dementors before, Harry remembered about their effect on temperature, and he jumped to his feet.

“Dementors. Stay here.” he said, before Disapparating. He reappeared instantly, though.

“What is it?” Tracey asked.

“There's an anti-Apparation field on the pub. Perhaps on the whole town. Strange...”

“Why is it strange?” Hermione asked.

He looked at her. “I told you about my visit in Azkaban, right? Dementors are in both the tangible reality and the gaseous one. They should be stopped by anti-Apparation fields... unless the field is keyed to them.” he finished.

Harry's friends were quite protected against mental attacks in the like of a Dementor's, and, heedless of the fact that most of the pub's patrons were silently recalling their worst memories, Hermione started to talk excitedly. Her eyes lit up, she told them about her last discovery concerning anti-Apparation walls.

At the same time, Harry felt his surroundings and he noticed that the Dementors had already started walking into the wizarding village. "Come on!" he said urgently, standing up.

Outside, they had the unhappy surprise of finding that, unlike last time, the attack had come from the other side of the village. Several students and adults were already on the ground, squirming under the onslaught of bad memories or plainly unconscious because of it. Behind the street corner, Harry noticed that several snakes were following the Dementors, transforming into humans when they reached a particular victim or another, and Disapparating with her. Her.

His eyes opened wide when the reality impacted with him: these were Death Eaters – a cursory scan had confirmed it – and they were kidnapping the youngest female students. Why?

In any case, there was the problem of the Dementors to take care of. The adults defending the town weren't prepared to fight against a hundred Dementors at once, and few of them had managed to cast one Patronus, if at all.

Harry didn't have the same kind of problem, and he turned to Hermione. "Let's share your spell."

She nodded and put forth her memories about anti-Apparation walls. After sharing them with the others, Harry told them to cast them around the Dementors to trap them. At the same time, he threw the Patronus Charm as many times he safely could.

Not wanting to tip his hand too early, he changed his identity between spells, and his friends were happily surprised to find four creatures erupting from the tip of his wand: an eagle, a wolf, a bull, and... a rhinoceros. He mentally told the white beasts to wait for his order to rush into the fight and transformed into a little girl.

While his friends were finishing trapping the Dementors, Harry Disillusioned himself and Levitated over the dark creatures – they could fly, but they were now trapped to the ground. Harry took a Silenced crossbow from his belt – he wasn't completely unprepared

either – and, spotting snakes slithering on the street, he pinned them all to the ground with dark green bolts, leaving only one alive.

He reappeared near that one and lied on the ground. When he saw the snake transform into a Death Eater and grab his feminine body, he gave the order for his Patronuses to attack.

The Death Eater didn't see the enhanced Patronuses tear into the trapped Dementors ranks. He didn't hear the dark creatures cries of anguish and pain as, trapped by the anti-Apparation walls, they were torn apart and trampled. He didn't notice Harry's friends casting spells on the four Patronuses to give them even more magic to feed on.

He wouldn't notice anything else either: Harry took advantage of the man's immobility while travelling in the gaseous reality to cast a focused Severing curse, cutting the man's body at his abdomen – the softest part. He then kicked the man's lower body away so that it would appear as though the man had splinched himself fatally.

Harry and the Death Eater appeared in a ritual chamber filled with snakes – 'Again!' Harry thought in annoyance.

The man's upper body fell on the floor with a wet sound, and his expression registered only disbelief before he went unconscious because of the shock. While several Death Eaters gasped at the sight, a few of them still had a cold head on their shoulders, and Harry was put under the Imperius Curse and told to follow the other girls.

Despite being impervious to that particular Unforgivable curse, he complied, playing his act. At the same time, having felt the anti-Apparation ward when he had arrived, he took hold of the mind of a Death Eater nearby and copied his identity in his own. At least, he would be able to escape soon.

Voldemort was here, and not in a good mood. Apparently, the Dark Lord had established a mental contact with his Death Eaters, and he wasn't taking very well the fact that several of them were dead. While he was ranting about the failure of "his" retaliatory attack to Hogwarts, though, something happened to the Dementor on his right.

Voldemort had kept the dark creature near him because it had a mind link of its own with its brethren, and it was now shivering as though it was suffering greatly.

“Calm yourself! What is it?” Voldemort asked, grasping his communication amulet.

“My brothers are dying, lord.” the creature transmitted through the medallion.

“How is that possible?” the Dark Lord demanded. “Dementors can’t die!”

“I do not know, lord.” the Dementor paused, and his shoulders slumped. “All is finished, now. I am the last.”

Voldemort paused for a second. “Have you seen Dumbledore on the scene?” he asked, turning to his followers while keeping the amulet in his hand.

But neither his Death Eaters nor the Dementor answered positively.

“The demon with four arms is dead, too... right? You haven’t seen him, have you?” he asked.

Everyone shook their head again.

“Have you seen...” he paused again, considering the likeliness of his question to be valid. “The Potter brat?”

Same lack of answer.

The Dark Lord began to pace, mumbling to himself. Apparently, mentioning Harry Potter had brought some old memories to the fore. “I’m sure the Prophecy isn’t complete. I will have to take it from the Ministry, but... how?”

“Look at yourself, Master.” Nagini hissed from her place next to her master’s throne.

He did so, and an unholy smile graced his lips. "Of course! Now that I'm human, I can enter the Ministry. As Tom Riddle, they don't know me as Voldemort!"

"Indeed."

Now calmed, he sat on his throne. "Proceed with the ritual!"

An impressive altar was brought on the dais, between Voldemort's throne and his followers. Su Li, apparently the youngest girl among them, was brought forward. After a spell to ensure that she was "appropriate" for the blessing of the temple – meaning that she was a virgin – she was ordered to strip and lie there, while a Death Eater in brown robes was holding a sacrificing knife. The other girls were told to make a circle around the man and the altar, holding hands. Neither Su nor any of the girls could fight the Imperius, and they complied.

Harry had been quite anxious at hearing the order given to Su, but the fact that the girls had to hold hands was an advantage for him. Taking advantage of the fact that all Death Eaters were quite taken by the ritual, he removed his left hand from Lisa Turpin's grasp and grabbed Su's hand.

And they all disappeared.

Harry knew that the disappearance wouldn't stay unnoticed by the Death Eaters, and that the Dementor could follow them. Both happened, and he hurried towards Hogwarts, while mentally calling his Patronuses. The four white creatures intercepted the Dementor as Harry was entering Hogsmeade, and they began to fight.

It wasn't an equal fight at first, but the Dementor fled upwards, and only the eagle Patronus was able to follow. Despite being quite powerful against the Dementors earlier, the eagle seemed unable to hurt that particular one, and the dark creature was even able to attack the white Patronus. Unbeknownst to everyone, when a Dementor died – which had been rare until today – its power was redistributed to the other Dementors. Being the last one, the Dementor in the air was as strong as the hundred that had been there before.

Thanks to his link with the eagle, Harry noticed the flying Dementor's unusual strength, and he asked his friends to cast the strongest anti-Apparation walls around it, several times over. Then, after conjuring a robe for Su and morphing into Henry Evans again, he Apparated in with the girls, and, since Dumbledore was there too, he left them under his care after mentally telling him about their mind-controlled state.

Then, while his friends were casting spells upon spells in the air, he called the three land-based Patronuses back to him.

The three beasts had been powered by his friends' magic before, and he shuddered under the strain on his magic reserve, before concentrating on a powerful flying creature. Lifting his wand, he aimed at the Dementor, concentrated, and the words erupted from his lips.

“EXPECTO PATRONUM!”

A dragon appeared, three times as large as his previous rhinoceros, and Harry fell on his knees, his magic almost exhausted. He was still conscious enough to direct the creature towards the enemy, and the dragon took flight.

The Dementor felt the powerful beast approaching and it decided to forego the fight with the eagle and flee. However, several anti-Apparation walls prevented him from doing so. It succeeded in breaking a couple of them, but Harry's friends had pushed all their magic into them and the remaining ones held true. The Dementor turned around and started to shriek in defiance. The dragon shrieked in answer and lunged forward.

One can only imagine the effect of a ton of hardened magic thrown on a seemingly-organic creature.

The Dementor's shriek was stopped instantly as its body was pressed upon the anti-Apparation walls. Several others broke, but the last ones held, and, in a last show of power, the remains of the Dementor exploded, releasing all the souls that had been taken before.

A cloud of ghostly shapes erupted around the dragon. Harry and several persons present guessed that these must have been people Kissed by the Dementors. A few dozens of these souls left heavenwards, disappearing on the way. From the other half, a few dozens left to return to their bodies – including the ones that had been Kissed during the attack on Hogsmeade.

It has to be known that most of the people Kissed while Dementors were on guard duty in Azkaban were criminals. And the ghost in the afternoon sky, having spent an extremely long time as Dementor fodder, were quite angry.

While Harry was directing the dragon back to himself, the ghosts had finished taking their surroundings in, and were charging downwards. Most of them were almost unnoticeable except for the cold effect they inflicted upon floating through a person. The angriest among them, though, were on the level of Peeves or worst, and they weren't playing.

Wood panels and glass windows broke under the angry spirits' charge, and shards went flying everywhere. Several students and adults received wounds before a collective effort was made to bring physical shields up. Thankfully, one of Harry's earliest courses had been on physical shields, and almost all students there knew about it.

Thankfully, Dumbledore knew several spells related to exorcism. After protecting the people around him, the old man started to reduce the enemies' ranks. Several adults helped as well.

His magical reserve replenished, Harry took a moment to observe the old man's spells, mentally asking him to share them. He immediately forwarded the information to his friends, and they then helped the adults tear the spectres apart.

When everything was finished, the time for the evening meal was quite near, but there was not a building safe in the whole village. Noticing this, Dumbledore called several adults around him. After discussing about it, the Heads of House agreed to start repairing the houses while everyone was invited for dinner in Hogwarts. Harry

helped, too, his knowledge in architecture spells – courtesy of Abigail – invaluable in their endeavour.

The house-elves were quite happy to help feed the additional contingent, and they enlarged the room enough to add a couple of tables for the townspeople.

The whole meal was calm, the atmosphere subdued because numerous people had been wounded during the attack. When, right before dessert, Fawkes appeared to Dumbledore's side with a message, everybody thought that something bad had happened again.

When the Headmaster stood up, the silence was deafening.

“Dear staff members, students, and guests,” the old man started with a smile, “I must tell you now that everything is alright. Madam Pomfrey tells me that every wounded has healed fully, and our repairing team tells me that the town is upright again.”

It took the assembled people a few seconds to process the information, but, when they did, a cheer came from everyone, along with a huge sigh of relief for several people.

After dinner, two particular redheads were ambushed near the entrance of Gryffindor common room: Ron and Ginny were coming back from the Great Hall, discussing about the fight, when three of their Housemates caught hold of them and dragged them to an empty classroom nearby. It took all of the two Weasleys' self-control not to bring forth their weapons of choice.

“Neville! What are you doing?” Ron asked, before registering the others there. “Seamus? Katie?”

“We are waiting.” the not-so-chubby-anymore boy said.

“What for?” Ginny enquired.

At that moment, four other Gryffindors entered the room: two redheads led by two young and female Chasers: Fred and George, with Alicia and Angelina. While the two older redheads took notice of the others – and the fact that they hadn't been invited to a snogging session –, Neville magically locked the door and Seamus threw a Silencing charm on it.

“What is the meaning of this?” Fred asked.

“That's our line.” Neville replied, before smiling. “You four were quite helpful in Hogsmeade today. Thanks!”

The Weasleys looked at each other, wondering where the conversation was heading to.

“Well... you're welcome.” George said.

“But why kidnap us to say that?” Fred added.

“Not that we mind being kidnapped-”

“-by our favourite Chasers-”

“-of course.” they finished together.

Neville was the one to answer. “We discussed during dinner, and Alicia and Angelina agreed with us. We want to know how to fight. It's the second time that Hogsmeade has been attacked by dark wizards in recent time.”

“If that continues, we want to be able to help.” Seamus insisted.

The four redheads looked at each other, before reaching a decision. Ron nodded at his three siblings and closed his eyes.

“Mate? What are you do-” Seamus asked.

“Shhh!” Ginny interrupted, but she didn't elaborate.

Several seconds later, the door was unlocked and opened, and, under five interrogative stares, a group of four students filtered in.

“I think you know Hermione already.” Fred started.

As usual, his twin continued the line of thoughts. “After all, she did lead the SAGES.”

“Tracey and Susan were the SAGES’ contact in Slytherin and Hufflepuff.” Ron continued.

“And Luna is a second year Ravenclaw.” Ginny finished.

“And a Snorkack hunter.” the girl finished dreamily.

To the surprise of the five Gryffindor who had initiated the meeting, the seven others didn’t react at Luna’s proclamation.

“Er... right.” Seamus stammered.

“You are the Gryffindor Chasers.” Hermione pointed out, looking at the three older girls.

“And you are Neville and Seamus.” Tracey finished, looking at the two boys.

A disembodied voice sounded at the door. “Now that the presentations are done, can someone tell me the reason for this meeting?”

...and Harry appeared.

“Pro... professor?” Katie squeaked. After all, curfew was only a few minutes away.

Neville noticed that the eight students hadn’t moved when the Defence teacher had spoken and he smiled. “You are together.” he said, and it wasn’t a question.

Harry looked at the boy, his head tilted to the side. "Indeed." he confirmed, before turning to the door and sealing it magically.

"And you all have some kind of mental link." Neville continued. "Ron concentrated, and four persons of different Houses pop by. And none of them reacted when you entered."

"Give the boy a cookie." a grinning Harry answered. He then turned to his friends. "Do we need anyone else for this?"

"I think that Bill could be an asset to us." Ron said.

"Garnet could help as well." Tracey said. "He's seventh year prefect in Slytherin, in fact you are wondering. Har... anyone can attest that he's quite fair, even for a Slytherin." She paused for a second, looking at the three Gryffindor Chasers thoughtfully. "And, if we are to expand this group, I think Adrian and Wendy are good candidates as well."

"Since we are in the vouching process," Susan butted in, "I think that Cedric Diggory is a valid candidate too."

"I also know a few Ravenclaws that could help us." Hermione spoke up. "But are we going to expand our group or give people a fighting chance? I think that we ought to invite these people to the Bushido club and see from then on." A pause. "Oh, and... for Ravenclaw, I vouch for Brutus and Penelope."

"Very well, we'll do that." Harry agreed, before turning to the Gryffindors. "These five, though, ought to know a bit more. Especially given that we have two Chasers involved with two of our red-haired members."

That got the four designated students shifting uncomfortably.

Harry was serious, though, and his next sentence silenced the room. "Alright... what do you know of Voldemort?"

To their credit, the five Gryffindors didn't react too badly at the name. Even Neville, who had been raised in fear of the name, didn't react much, his blinking eyes the only sign of his nervousness.

"Almost nothing," he answered. "Although we know that he attacked Hogsmeade twice and Hogwarts once." He paused for a second. "And there have been very few casualties this year, all things considered. Even with the Dementors. And I saw some of you going at the fight while grown men were shivering in fright."

"I second that." Seamus piped in, before clearing his throat. "I mean... on top of casting spells at the Dementors, I saw you doing Merlin-knows-what with some white beasts."

"And you want to help." Harry half-asked, only to be rewarded by five enthusiastic nods. "No objection from the club members?" he asked his friends, and all of them shook their heads. "Alright. Now that we spoke about Voldemort, what do you know about Harry Potter?"

It took a dozen minutes to prepare the five mental vaults and to transfer the memories related to Harry Potter there. Once done, the five were suitably impressed.

"Wow." breathed Neville. "I mean... Just that. Wow."

"Hey!" Katie squeaked, realization dawning on her. "You are younger than me!"

"This is only a façade." Harry answered, gesturing at his body.

"A damn good one." Angelina muttered, before slapping her hand to her mouth. "Sorry."

Harry chuckled, before turning serious again. "Now that you know, you are invited to the Bushido club. While others may see it as a martial arts get-together, my friends and I share spells and fighting abilities there, and we train those afterwards."

“Count me in.” Neville said suddenly. “I don’t want to be powerless should anyone attack me or my friends again.”

A chorus of “Me too.” came from the four other Gryffindors, and Harry smiled.

“Welcome, then. We’ll see you on Monday.”

“Monday?” Alicia asked.

Harry smirked, before quoting the club rules. “The participation to the Bushido club implies that you belong to other fighting clubs as well. In the same way, those clubs require that you go to others. With everything that is required, we will meet six days a week.”

“Bummer.” Seamus commented, but everyone knew it was good-natured, and they laughed.
A week later...

“Damn muggle contraptions!” the man cursed, looking at the keypad of the out-of-order phone booth. “What’s it, now? 6-2-4-4-2.”

“Ministry of Magic.” a bored female voice replied. “Please state your name and business.”

“Thomas Riddle.” the man answered. “Here to visit the Department of Mysteries, if possible.”

“Thank you, Mr Riddle. Please go to the front booth for the wand weighing.”

A badge appeared on the counter and, as soon as Voldemort hung up, the booth floor started to descend steadily. A few seconds later, a door opened and he was entering the atrium of the Ministry of Magic. Pinning the badge to his robe, he went to the entrance.

“Good morning, Mr Riddle.” the same woman spoke. She wasn’t even trying to smile as she held her hand forward. “Your wand, please.”

The Dark Lord had no desire of letting his wand be touched by anyone else, but, if he wanted to stay inconspicuous, he didn’t have much choice in the matter.

“Thirteen inches, ebony and Thestral heartstring.” the witch intoned, reading the result of the magical wand weighing. A ticket was issued with the wand description and Tom Riddle was allowed access to the Ministry.

While he was walking towards the Department of Mysteries, Voldemort’s thoughts whirled around his old yew wand and how he had come to lose it. Jugson had researched the effect he had described, and it seemed that the other’s wand had been a brother to this one. Brother wands, it seemed, couldn’t fight against each other.

As he arrived in the waiting room for the Department of Mysteries, he resolved to go to Ollivander soon. Perhaps he could coax the old man in revealing who he had sold his wand’s brother to.

“Mister... Riddle?” the young man at the counter said, looking at his badge. “What can I do for you?”

“I would like to consult a prophecy.” Voldemort replied, wondering if it could be as simple as that. If it was, he would have done it before attacking the Potters.

“Very well.” the man replied, pressing a button with his wand. “Please wait here, an Unspeakable will fetch you soon.”

A little annoyed at being treated so mundanely, Voldemort walked away from the counter and, crossing his arms, he began to repeat in his head a couple of plans he had for his followers. Ten minutes later, he had finished with the short-term plans and was inspecting the paintings in the waiting room. Fifteen minutes later, he was huffing impatiently and decided to pass the time by reading the Prophet. As

soon as he found an interesting issue, though, his name was called and he threw the journal on the table where it had been.

“What?” he asked. When he noticed that his guide was there, he calmed down, though. The Unspeakables weren’t known for their forgiveness. They weren’t known at all, even, as they were all clad in purple robes with hoods hiding their face. The only thing that could be known about them was their gender. And still...

“Sorry.” Voldemort said to end the foreboding silence, the word feeling as though it was pulling his teeth.

“I’m your guide for today.” the man said from the depths of his hood. “Follow me.”

The two of them walked through the Department of Mysteries until they entered their destination. The room was huge, and numerous shelves were holding little spheres. The Unspeakable motioned Voldemort toward a microphone-like device.

“Speak your full name in here, and the prophecies concerning you will light up.”

“How do you know they concern me?”

“The names of the persons concerned are listed on the prophecies’ stands, as soon as they are identified.” the man answered. “Sometimes, it isn’t known before the prophecy comes to pass.”

The Dark Lord nodded and complied, and four lights illuminated the room from the shelves. Two red, one yellow, and one green.

“The red ones are the ones that are already accomplished.” the Unspeakable commented. “That yellow one means that it is one occurring right now. It’s not important.”

“Not important?” the Dark Lord enquired. “What do you mean?”

“That particular one always light up yellow whoever comes here. It describes this hall, that’s all. Now, would you like to see the others?”

Voldemort nodded and went to the first of the reds. Its pedestal indicated that it was a prophecy made by Cassandra Trelawney sixty-odd years ago, and that it was about him. Curious, he turned to his guide.

“To hear, one, simply take it and shake it.” the man instructed from the main aisle. “Only people whose name is listed can take a Prophecy off the shelf.” he added.

Voldemort nodded, before doing as he was told. A mist rose from the ball into the shape of the famous Seer, and a small voice started to speak. It was so low that he had to strain his ears to hear, and he was sure that the Unspeakable couldn’t hear it – short of magically enhanced hearing, of course.

“He who was raised in shadow
Will learn ’bout his heritage.
He whose name stands for puzzle
Will confound peers and elders.
His soul split, his spirit dark,
And his name changed but the same,
He will reign over shadows,
Thus starting a new dark age.”

Trembling slightly at the revelation that his destiny had been foretold, he put the sphere back on its place and turned to his guide. Wordlessly, the two of them went to the second accomplished Prophecy. Its stand revealed that it was about him and several of his followers. Seven of them, in fact. And one Bill Weasley.

He repeated his previous action and another small voice came forth.

“The Dark Lord Voldemort
Will unknowingly summon demons
But his red-haired prisoner
Won’t belong to that sort of fiend.

They will fight, and, ultimately
All will fall before the school.”

With a cry of rage, Voldemort slammed the Prophecy on the ground. The glass ball broke, and the memory inside evaporated, forming the words a last time before disappearing.

“Be thankful that it has passed.” the Unspeakable commented. “Should you break a Prophecy about the future, the fine will be much higher.”

“What do you mean?” he snarled.

“Accomplished Prophecies belong to our History. In breaking one of them, you incur a fine of five hundred Galleons.”

“Why would I pay for that... that rubbish!” the Dark Lord had half the mind to curse the man and break all the Prophecies. Without a wand, though, it would be difficult. By taking back her power, his serpentine goddess had taken away most of his wandless magic. Forcing himself into breathing normally, he relented. “All right.”

His guide seemed to think about it before going to the last prophecy and taking his wand out. “I warn you. If you do the slightest false move with this one, I’ll curse you.”

Voldemort nodded, still angry but resigned. He went to the ball glowing green and repeated his actions.

Nothing happened.

He shook the glass ball again and felt the liquid swirling inside, but it didn’t yield anything.

“What is the meaning of this?” he growled.

“Give me that ball.” the Unspeakable ordered and Voldemort complied.

The purple-robed wizard inspected the ball and he gasped. He then looked at the Prophecy's pedestal and gasped again. Wordlessly, he walked away. Not having anything else to do, Voldemort followed.

They crossed the revolving room again and entered a large office. It was well-furnished and, despite being in the lowest levels of the Ministry, an open window was displaying a view of the sea, complete with sound. A wall was completely taken with bookshelves, where rested books, rolled scrolls, pensieves, and various other items. The desk itself was of the highest quality, and Voldemort knew that the Unspeakable behind it was one of the highest-ranking ones.

The guide, the Prophecy still in his hand, was waiting for his superior to finish what he had been doing.

"What is it?" the man finally said, pushing a stack of parchments to the side.

"A Prophecy has been tampered with!" the guide exclaimed, as if it was the end of the world.

The other Unspeakable's answer was to wandlessly Summon the glass ball. "Who does it concern?" he asked, the ball Levitating and turning around in front of his hooded face.

"Tom Riddle," the man began, gesturing towards Voldemort, "and Harry Potter."

The chief Unspeakable turned towards Voldemort, and the Dark Lord had the impression of being judged. "I know who you are." A pause. "Tell me you didn't touch that Prophecy before today."

Before he could react, Voldemort complied. "I didn't touch that Prophecy before today." he repeated, before blinking. He was quite angry at having been manipulated, but the Unspeakables weren't even concerned by the fact that a Dark Lord was in the room with them. 'Blast Wadjet!' he thought, before a pain in his head reminded him of who Wadjet was.

“It must be Harry Potter, then.” the younger Unspeakable said.

The older nodded and a heavy book appeared on his desk. He spoke a few words – Voldemort was sure he heard something about a grape seed and a hawk – and a parchment appeared atop the book.

It was empty.

“Most curious.” the chief Unspeakable said.

“What can we do?” his younger colleague asked.

“Bring Mr Riddle back.” The man then turned to Voldemort. “I’m sorry, but the Prophecy you sought has effectively been tampered with.”

“There’s no mean to get it back?” the Dark Lord enquired.

“It depends on the circumstances of the tampering, which we will investigate. At the present moment, though, I can’t tell you. Good day, Mr Riddle.” the man then nodded at his subordinate, who went to the door.

Recognizing a dismissal, Voldemort started to follow his guide.

“Mr Riddle!” the chief Unspeakable called, and Voldemort turned around.

“Yes?”

“It would be in our mutual benefit that you don’t come back.”

Voldemort blanched at the unveiled threat, but his present state didn’t allow him to express his displeasure, and he nodded before following his guide outside. He bristled again when said guide accompanied him to the front booth where he had to pay the 500-Galleon fine by signing a receipt with his wand.

He would express his displeasure later, though, and his followers wouldn't be thrilled with it.

From another corner of the atrium, Dumbledore noticed the departing man and sighed. "What are you doing here, Tom?" he asked himself. Noticing the Unspeakable leaving towards the lifts, he hurried after him. "Sir!" he called.

The purple-robed man turned around and looked at him. "Headmaster Dumbledore?"

"What did Mr Riddle want?"

"I don't think that it is your business, Headmaster." A pause. "Follow me."

They entered the lift and, as soon as the doors closed, the Unspeakable turned to the old man. "I know you will pester everyone in my department until you have your answer."

At that, the older man had the grace to blush. It was the truth, after all.

"And, as you'll get it eventually, I can already tell you that Mr Riddle wanted to see the prophecies related to him."

"You said prophecies, plural. Were there many of them?"

"Three. But one of them... one of them had been tampered with!" the young man exclaimed. Visibly, he was really upset about that.

Several gears turned in Dumbledore's mind and he came up with the only logical conclusion. "Was it the one about Harry Potter too?"

The concealed hood turned to him, and Dumbledore felt the curious gaze headed his way. "How do you know?"

"I happen to be the one that Prophecy had been made to."

"Great!" the young man said, happy that his current problem could be solved that quickly. "Perhaps you can-"

“I’m sorry.” Dumbledore interrupted. “My old mind isn’t what it used to be, and I don’t remember its exact wording. It wouldn’t do to have an inaccurate Prophecy, now would it?”

The Unspeakable huffed. “Of course not.”

The lift chose that moment to land on the ninth level and the Unspeakable exited it. He had the surprise of finding Dumbledore following him.

“Actually,” the old man started with a warm smile, “I was heading your way. The Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures sent me to the Unspeakables when I asked about the Dementors. They said that, given the danger level of these creatures, only the highest-ranking Unspeakables had the clearance to divulge information to me.”

The young man seemed to think about it before acquiescing. “Since it’s my shift, I’ll lead you.”

“Thank you.”

Dumbledore was led to the same office Voldemort had left earlier, and the chief Unspeakable dismissed his subordinate before conjuring an armchair for the old Headmaster.

“Lemon sherbet, Albus?” the Unspeakable spoke with a smile in his voice.

“Why, thank you, Theophrastus.” Dumbledore replied in kind.

“You know, that secrecy among the Unspeakable isn’t that useful if we have known each other for more than a century.” the man said, while pushing his hood back, revealing two intense brown eyes in a wrinkled face.

“As if I could have forgotten that, my friend. As if. Nicholas told me about your wife. My condolences.”

Theophrastus Philippus Aureolus Bombastus von Hohenheim, who was referred to as Paracelsus, member of the same group Nicholas Flamel was in – and consequently referred as an alchemist by the muggle historians –, shook his head sadly. “Thank you, Albus. Each time that happens, I have the impression that my heart is ripped in two. And it seems to mend itself when, a century later, I find a beautiful lady interested in the crumpled old man that I appear to be.” A pause. “She was the seventh, you know.”

Dumbledore nodded, and the two of them stayed silent for a moment.

Paracelsus shook himself awake and looked at his younger friend. “And what can I do for you?”

“The Dementors. They attacked Hogsmeade.”

“I happen to have read the news, too. What do you want to know about them?”

“I want to know if the Dementors are truly extinct.”

A pause. Then, “Why should they be?”

“The hundred who have attacked have been destroyed. Nothing strange happened upon their destruction. But the one who came afterwards was more powerful, and its demise brought forward many ghosts and other angry spirits. Thousands, perhaps. I still wonder how the half dozen teachers able to exorcise them have been able to accomplish this...” the Headmaster trailed off, vaguely remembering that Harry hadn’t acted immediately upon receiving the memories about the spell. Perhaps he had shared it in some ways?

He was brought off his musings by the appearance of a thick book on his counterpart’s desk.

“What is it?” he asked.

“The register for Azkaban guard duty, and it includes a count of Dementors. As you may know, the Ministry round up all the Dementors and sent them on the prison island a few centuries ago. As magical means of location were used to be sure that none was left outside, we can be sure that this registry lists all the Dementors still alive.”

Like the previous time he had needed a subset of a book, the ancient Unspeakable uttered a few words and a parchment appeared atop the book. And, like last time as well, the parchment was blank.

Paracelsus was surprised for a moment, but a large smile quickly found its way through his wrinkles. “It seems that you were correct in your assumption. There is no Dementor left.”

Dumbledore grinned. “That means that we got rid of one of the darkest creatures in the world!” he enthused.

“The articles about that were impressive, to say the least. There was no casualty, was there?” the other man commented, before starting on what was apparently a different subject – but the two men knew otherwise. “Nicholas speaks very little of his young apprentice, but the very little he says is extremely positive.”

“Yes. Young Harry is... resourceful.”

A pause.

“You don’t happen to know whether he could have pulled a stunt like this?” Paracelsus asked, Summoning the Prophecy ball from the shelf nearby.

“Is this...?”

“This is a prophecy related to Tom Riddle and Harry Potter. It has been replaced by water.”

Dumbledore looked at the sphere in wonder, before grinning widely. Soon after, he started to chuckle, and, his counterpart following, his laughter quickly evolved into full-fledged guffaws.

“Harry, Harry, Harry...” he said when they had calmed. “You sure know your way around.”

“Should I fine the young man with the tampering of a Prophecy and of Ministry files as well?” Paracelsus asked, pointing at the entrance registry conspicuously lacking Harry Potter’s name.

“Given that Mr Potter is a minor and that you have to catch him before fining him for anything...” Dumbledore trailed off, his eyes twinkling.

“Alright.” the other man said gruffly. “A reprimand will do, then.”

The two ancient men fell into a companionable silence.

“Am I correct in thinking that the Time Turner was in Mr Potter’s possession when it broke?” Paracelsus asked out of the blue.

“Speaking of that, I still want to know why I have to follow the usual procedures to get a replacement.” Dumbledore replied.

“That’s because we don’t have that many of them available, and it takes time to create one.” A pause. “You didn’t answer my question, though.” the Unspeakable said with a pointed look.

“I didn’t? Figures...” If anything, the look of glee in Dumbledore’s eyes answered the man’s question.

“Fine!” the chief Unspeakable exclaimed. After a moment, he added “You truly live up to your reputation, Albus. You are barmy.”

“I aim to please.” Dumbledore said pleasantly, his eyes still laughing.

To be continued in next chapter: Springy Confrontations...

Lo and behold! Snape is dead!
Voldemort's human again!
Of reviews my muse is fed.
More Quidditch? You've a bargain.

Chapter 36 – Springy Confrontations

posted June 3rd, 2006

Lord Voldemort exited the Ministry of Magic in a hurry, before heading to a secluded alleyway. His goals had been to Apparate to his temple and spend his nerves on the Death Eaters there, but the small alley was full of garbage and he decided that it was better to destroy these than his too few followers.

After a satisfying session of trashcan bashing, he remembered that he had wanted to visit a particular old man and Apparated to Diagon Alley.

It was quite strange, when you thought about it. Here was Lord Voldemort, the fearsome Dark Lord and probably the strongest in centuries, and nobody cared about him. An old hag who walked into him left without even the slightest glance.

Voldemort refrained from cursing the offending woman and headed to his destination: Ollivander's wand shop.

Needless to say, the wand maker was quite surprised.

"Mr... Riddle?" he asked guardedly. "What can I do for you?"

"You remember me?"

"I remember all my customers, Mr Riddle. Yours was yew and phoenix feather, I assume."

Voldemort grinned. "I'm here to discuss about that. It has been destroyed, you see." He paused as the old man gasped. "And one of my followers- I mean... someone told me that it could be because it duelled a brother wand."

Ollivander hummed noncommittally, his fingers absently toying with the measuring tape.

“Can you tell me more about that?” Voldemort asked. “And can you tell me who you sold my wand’s brother to?”

“Well... I could... but-”

“Let me rephrase this, old man.” Voldemort stepped forward, and his aura of evilness flared. “I want these answers. And, if you don’t cooperate, I can make sure that you’ll be out of business soon.”

Ollivander gulped. In all the wizarding wars, few wizards had dared turning on the wand-making industry. However, the old man also knew that, should Voldemort decide to put him out of business, that would be a low blow to the wizarding world. Especially as the dark wizards would then be the only ones to detain his impressive stock of wands.

Taking his decision, he spoke. “Brother wands are wands sharing cores of the same creature. In your case, it had been a phoenix’s tail feather. It is not that rare to have two wands linked in that way, but, usually, the time elapsed between the moments the brother wands are picked usually amounts in centuries. Research has shown that brother wands couldn’t fight each other directly. It was destroyed, you said?” the old man asked, his scholar upbringing coming to the fore.

Voldemort pushed the question to the side with a sweep of his hand. “The name.” he growled.

Ollivander blinked, and remembered who was in front of him. “I sold that wand to a boy entering Hogwarts. Kentaro Anderson is the name. It was holly and... well, you know already: phoenix tail feather.” A pause. “It is strange, though.”

“What do you mean?”

“I distinctly remember reading about an attack on Hogsmeade, a year ago.” Ollivander said, not looking at Voldemort. “And the casualties listed that name. When did you say your wand broke?”

The Dark Lord stayed silent, considering the information he had just received. Then with an unrevealing grunt, he escaped the little shop, leaving a bewildered old man behind him. A bewildered and slightly anxious old man. Five minutes later, Ollivander closed his shop and went to his fireplace.

He had some backup plans to implement.
Hogwarts...

During the weeks leading to the final exams, Harry's abilities would expand some more, and, likewise, several additions would be brought into his possessions or his friends'.

One of the first things he did was to explore the memories he had received from Ryan, the last time he and his double had shared their memories. Ryan had spent a long time in Japan, training with Goken his ability with the strangest weapons from his paraphernalia. Harry discovered that, as he had surmised a long time ago, the sickle-chain-cannonball weapon could be used to disrupt magical shields, and he used the sessions of the Bushido club to train this with his friends. Needless to say, Fred and George were impressed and they started to train with the unusual weapon a bit more. This often ended in a tangle of chain, of course, but they were progressing quickly. In the same way, Susan benefited from the additional moves Harry learnt about the side-handle batons.

It was also during the same time that Harry thought about an idea that had been in his head for some time. Using a voluntarily incomplete Animagus transformation and a bit of Metamorphmagus powers, he succeeded in sprouting a pair of wings. However, despite already having the nerves and muscles for four arms, the wing-related muscles needed additional training before he could use them at all. Training in the nights, he would only need a few days to be able to glide. Two weeks later, he would be ready to fly for a short time. Come the end of the school year, he would be able to fly for hours at a time, do acrobatics, or hold someone or something while airborne. It was all a question of wingspan – and relative muscle mass.

Harry wasn't spending all his free time on flying, though. At some times during the first weeks of May, he started to search for serious books about Time in the bookstores in Hogsmeade, Diagon Alley, and even Knockturn Alley. There were many books about the subject, but none of them was serious enough to be considered working material. Noticing this, Harry deducted that either the Ministry or the Unspeakables must have had a hand in censoring the information. After all, messing with time was dangerous. Finally, it was Dumbledore who gave him a book from his private library. Even then, the majority of the book content wasn't useful either: half of it retold failed experiments, and the other half was a whipped-up theory about Time, its flow, and the travels to the past and the future. Harry could only relate to a few points here and there, but it was better than nothing.

During his travels to Diagon Alley, Harry had also noticed a jeweller selling magical watches. Learning that these watches could include hands showing the state of people – like Mrs Weasley's clock –, he had decided to indulge in a shopping spree and bought a watch for each of his friends. That way, they could all know if either of them was in difficulty. For his own watch, though, he asked the jeweller to attach three clock faces to his wristband. One was for England and his wizarding friends, while the two others were for Switzerland and Japan, displaying local time and the state of his friends and family there.

In the same way his abilities were expanding, his circle of friends was also widening at the same time.

His earliest friends, who had almost the same skills he did, were Tracey, Susan, Hermione, Luna, Ron, Ginny, and the twins. Then, there were people "in the know" about his identity, the secret protected by strong mental defences or a hidden vault. Remus and Sirius, along with Dumbledore, McGonagall, Mei Wu, Moody, and Amelia Bones belonged to that group.

In Hogwarts, a wider group of people was now using Harry's help to learn to defend themselves – more than with the Defence lessons only, that is, even if Harry made it so these were advantageous to everyone. Some of them were Neville, Seamus, and the three

Gryffindor Chasers. The five Gryffindors now knew about Harry's identity and were training hard to reach the level of the others. Another part of that group was made of people training hard as well, but they didn't know about Harry's identity as of yet. They knew he had several interesting powers, though, among which the ability to share skills by mentally copying them. That part was composed of Bill Weasley, Cedric Diggory, William Garnet, Adrian Pucey, Wendy Fawcett, Brutus Armstrong, Penelope Clearwater, and, surprisingly, Draco Malfoy. Apparently, the Malfoy heir believed his well-being at risk, and he was pushing himself hard on the battle training.

Needless to say, several aspirin bottles had to be consumed over the course of the month.

Then, in the last days of May, the fighting clubs stopped completely. Several students hadn't noticed the announcement and showed themselves at the usual times, but Harry gently told them that, given that it was the last week before the end-of-year exams, time would surely be spent in better activity than clubs. Some disagreed, but Harry knew it was only a fanfaronade, and he dismissed them as well.

He didn't recall his challenge, though, and a particular group of people thought that it would be fun to take advantage of the exam frenzy-related adrenaline to do something about it.

Once again, the exams were a tense affair, and several students felt the need to have Cheering charms cast on them. Incidentally, these charms were the topic of the third year exam for Charms.

For the students he had to grade in Defence – which meant all those not passing their OWLs or NEWTs –, Harry had decided to rely heavily on practice and had a mock duel with each and every student. When Tracey went against him, he couldn't miss the smirk on her face, but he dismissed it as her reaction to the irony of the situation. As she was his friend – his girlfriend, even – he didn't go in her head to find the reason either.

It was only during the dinner of the very last exam day for everyone that he found out. Right after dessert, a group of four students – incidentally, there was one student from each House – stood up and

went to the Headmaster. When the five of them looked at him, all of them smiling, he had a faint idea. It was quickly crystallized.

“Henry?” the Headmaster asked. “Are you ready for these four to answer your challenge?”

Harry frowned at Tracey, but he could only see excitement at the prospective mock battle. Seamus was there, biting his lips in apprehension. Harry would later learn that Ron, Neville, and Seamus had fought against each other in the Room of Requirements to determine who would go against him. Seamus won against each of them separately, and together. The chosen Ravenclaw student was Luna, and the Hufflepuff was Susan.

He gulped. What were those thinking? “When and where?”

“Here and now.” Tracey replied.

“The scenery?”

“Arena.”

“The rules of defeat?”

“First team unconscious... or yielding.”

“The choice of weapons?” he asked again.

The four looked at each other, before smiling at him. “Yours.”

‘Overconfident, are we now?’ he mentally sent his girlfriend, who snorted through the same link. After a few seconds of reflection, he nodded. “Very well. Everything goes.”

‘Everything?’ Tracey asked mentally, her tone conveying a smirk as well.

Harry sent the image of himself rolling his eyes. ‘Only those powers we are comfortable with the audience to know. Obviously, Apparating

in Hogwarts is out. Mental techniques aren't allowed either.' he finished, before closing the link.

Dumbledore had watched the discussion, and, as the terms had been set, he stood up. "Students!" he called. "Once again, our Defence Professor has been challenged. If you want to stay to witness his battle against the four contestants here, please stay near the walls as we will reconfigure the room. Thank you."

Five minutes later, all the students in the room were standing against the walls. Over the course of the school year, the mock battles with the Defence teacher had attracted many students and staff members alike. Thinking that the four contenders were young and inexperienced, the onlookers had prepared themselves for another exhibition match.

Once the room was cleared, Dumbledore and McGonagall Transfigured the tables and chairs into stepped rows of seats, while Harry and Flitwick created an arena of sorts. It consisted of a square centre, of an area of a hundred square yards, and four small discs linked to it by 10-foot long bridges.

Once the scene was ready, the four students stepped on the small discs and Harry went in the middle of the square. Susan was opposite to Luna, and Tracey was likewise with Seamus. At the same time, Dumbledore brought up a magical shield around the arena.

Harry looked at the shield, before eyeing Dumbledore critically. "Can you add a physical shield there as well?"

"Why so?"

"I told them "everything goes" and I'm sure things will fly."

The old Headmaster acquiesced and created the second shield. One after the other, Harry looked at his four friends intently, before couching and concentrating on strengthening his skin.

Dumbledore began the countdown.

“Three...”

Harry's robe was in fact the magical mantle he had been given by his Venetian friends, and Harry mentally ordered it to change into a garment in which he could actually fight. At the same time, Tracey, Luna, and Susan put their hands in the air, and several onlookers gasped and started to complain, thinking that they were cheating.

“Two...”

The three contestants had just summoned their weapons of choice, though. Harry cast a quick glance around, and noticed that Seamus wasn't fazed by that. This indicated that they rehearsed the fight somehow. Narrowing his eyes, he mentally called his katana as well.

“One...”

His own katana having appeared in his hand, he readied himself. He had already noticed that Susan had summoned her tonfas and Luna her shields. Tracey had her two wakizashis, too, indicating that she was going for a close fight. The unknown quantity and only sharpshooter was Seamus, then, and Harry faced him, oblivious to the fact that Susan had pocketed her tonfas and was retrieving her other weapon of choice.

“Begin!”

Susan's secondary weapon was the short bow, and she had pulled the drawstring as quickly as possible, creating three arrows. As soon as the Headmaster spoke the word, she released them. At the same time, Luna had started to run... towards Seamus. And she was incanting at the same time.

The boy had started a couple of spells already, and Harry was casting the counterspell when he was struck from behind. His concentration disturbed, his spell failed, and he was quickly bound by strong ropes. Looking down, he noticed that a wakizashi was resting on the floor and he groaned. Despite not having distance weapons in

her personal weaponry, Tracey knew how to use her short blades, and wasn't afraid of throwing them. Especially as she could recover them anytime. Harry was thankful to have reinforced his skin, though, because that wicked blade could have been really harmful otherwise.

He was still hurting from somewhere, and remembered the two arrows that had flown on each side of him. Once again, he groaned. How could he forget Susan's ability with the bow? He knew his skin wasn't reinforced enough to repel piercing attacks yet, and the arrow sticking from his rear was a proof of that.

Harry was bound, but that didn't prevent him from twisting his body, and he quickly brought his katana on the rope that was tying his feet together. Then, running and jumping around to evade the spells from Luna and Seamus – something that was strangely very difficult to do, as the boy had an incredible aim – as well as Susan's arrows, he morphed his upper body to relax the ropes. Once he had enough leeway, he cut those too.

Evading three sharpshooters and morphing himself had required all his attention, and he hadn't noticed Tracey Disillusioning herself. Just as he was aiming his katana at Susan, a curse on his lips, two blurred blades struck his own and disarmed him. At the same time, ropes flew forward again and he found himself tightly bound. He tried to squirm out of the way again, but Tracey was on him this time, and, having foregone the use of mind arts, he couldn't take control of her. A couple of spells later, he was really unable to move and could only yield.

After he had been delivered from the ropes, he stood up slowly, wincing when the arrow in his rear made itself known again. These were temporary arrows, though, and it disappeared just as Susan was apologizing profusely.

"I'm sorry." she was saying. "I'm really sorry. I thought you weren't going to get hurt that badly. Do you want me to-"

"Susan!" Harry interrupted. Now that he was open to the mind waves again, he had caught the girl's intent and it was only through

Metamorphmagus control that he didn't blush. 'Don't finish that sentence.' he sent her.

She stopped and looked at him in wonder, before going beet red. The body of onlookers was completely silent, shocked by the indomitable teacher's defeat and it would have been very bad form to finish her sentence with "kiss it to make it better."

Dumbledore stood and cleared his throat. "Well, Professor, it seems that you have been bested."

"Seems so." Harry answered nonchalantly.

"They cheated!" a voice sounded from the crowd.

Before Dumbledore could answer, though, Harry had raised his hand. "They did not. All they did was preparing themselves for the fight. It is the same as drawing one's wand."

A pause.

"Do you want a rematch?" Dumbledore asked Harry.

The boy-turner-teacher thought about it and turned to the four students. "What do you think?" he asked them.

"I say it's a pity you didn't try harder." Luna said. "I haven't had time to play my part."

"I will go easier on you." Susan added.

"Of course not!" Harry replied indignantly. "You did well, and I want you to continue."

'Promise?' she asked mentally, and he replied in kind.

"I say aye." Seamus said, although Harry felt waves of increased self-confidence coming from the foursome's earlier success.

“Go for it.” Tracey said, before mentally amending herself. ‘Even if we are going to lose, now that you are awake, I don’t really care. I got you.’

‘You got me? That was your idea all along?’ Harry asked huffily. ‘And what do you mean by awake?’

Tracey sent the image of a wink and turned to the Headmaster.

“Since they all agree, I’m going for an encore.” Harry said, and everyone took their starting place again.

This time, as soon as Dumbledore gave the signal, Harry surrounded himself with a physical shield and, after sidestepping Seamus’ incoming curse, he threw a magical shield as well. Several arrows were sent in his direction, but they stopped a few inches from his body. Having an idea, Harry moved so that Susan fired towards Seamus. The arrows found Luna’s shields, however, and the Ravenclaw girl smiled. Wondering about the girl’s “role”, Harry threw a couple of spells in the boy’s direction, and had the half-surprise of seeing Luna’s shields intercepting his curses.

Harry was impressed, but he wasn’t done yet. Aiming his katana in Susan’s general direction, he spoke one word.

“Accio!”

Susan heard the word, but, contrarily to what she thought, she didn’t move. She didn’t have time to react, though, when a chair impacted her from behind, knocking her out.

While the chair was flying, a Disillusioned girl had turned around Harry again, and, coming from his right, she was ready to repeat the disarming move. Harry’s attention wasn’t split like before, though: his magical shield was holding true against the spells coming from Seamus and Luna. He had no difficulty sensing Tracey’s approach, then, and, just as Susan was knocked down, he threw a Stunner in her direction.

Hearing Tracey's blades clattering on the ground, and knowing that she had followed their path, Harry knew that he still had a couple of spellcasters to take care of. Turning toward them, he decided to try the magical duelling approach first. Since Luna's shields were blocking almost every curse of his, he decided to try another approach. Foregoing all defence besides his trusted shield charm, he threw numerous spells at the pair, forcing them into a more defensive stance. It was only relative, though, as only Luna worked full-time on defending their position.

Since his previous action with Susan had been successful, he wanted to see if he could repeat it, but he couldn't see an empty chair behind Seamus. That's why he voluntarily threw a couple of spells off target by a fraction of an inch. These spells gone astray were Conjuration, though, and the needed chair appeared behind Seamus. Another spell later, the piece of furniture zoomed forward and impacted the boy's head rather rudely.

Luna sensed that Seamus was off and she found out that she was the last one standing. It didn't seem to faze her, though, and Harry kept his attention on her. In numerous occasions, the girl had surprised him during their training sessions.

And she did it again.

Keeping a shield in front of her, she threw the other one at him. He ducked quickly and heard the shield clattering on the floor behind him. The two of them started to exchange spells at high speed, but Luna surprised him by repeating his previous action. She quietly Summoned her shield to her and Harry was promptly hit from behind by the rather solid item. It was only thanks to his various powers that he didn't fall unconscious. While he was distracted, though, Luna did something that he didn't catch immediately.

She awakened Tracey.

Harry charged the Ravenclaw and, wanting to end the duel quickly, he started to attack her using martial arts. When his fists met Luna's defences each time, he decided to make more of them. By throwing two punches and a kick to the girl at the same time and from different

angles, he finally managed to pass over her shields and knock her out.

He looked at her prone form for a few seconds, breathing a little harder than usual, before Levitating her and Seamus. Staying on the square platform, he directed them to Madam Pomfrey, who was already anxious to see the extent of their damage. Harry had performed a cursory scan, though, and knew that they had nothing the Medi-witch couldn't heal.

Harry was prepared to hear Dumbledore announce his win. Consequently, as soon as the two teenagers were lowered on the ground, he was quite surprised to hear the whispered incantation for a Stunning spell instead. Not knowing where it was coming from and acting on reflex alone, he jumped six feet in the air, whirling around in the same move.

It was just in time, as two red beams of magic erupted through the place he had occupied before.

Following the rays' path to their source, he had the surprise to see a perfectly ready and awake Tracey crouching on the opposite corner of the square platform. She had both her wakizashis in hand and pointing at him. While he was reflecting on the fact that she had cast the spell through her blades and the numerous implications of it, she whirled around, blades slashing through the air, and stopped in a pose where her arms were outstretched, her right sword pointing forward and the other backward.

Harry tilted his head.

'Come on.' she sent. 'You have probably won that turn already. Let's give them an exhibition swordfight.'

He smiled and prepared himself as well. 'Speaking of exhibition, how can you fight in these heavy robes?'

'They are illusions, you dimwit.' she replied mockingly. 'Ready?'

He called his blade of choice, and, his legs flexed and his left side facing her, he nodded. 'You're on.'

What followed would be the talk of the school for a long time, taking almost the same amount of lines than Quidditch in the letters the students would send each other during the summer.

Harry had only one blade, but it had a longer reach and he wielded it quicker than Tracey. However, like Harry's other friends, the girl had specialized in her weapon of choice, and she knew moves that Harry hadn't seen yet. Some of them included blocking with one sword and striking with the other, forcing Harry into uncomfortable situations. At other times, she was wielding the two blades one behind the other, reinforcing an attack move: if Harry could deflect the first blade, chances were that the second would pass through.

However, the Boy-Who-Lived had a few cards up his sleeve too. Thanks to his hardened skin, he could grasp the pointy end of his own weapon and use the sword's guard as though it was an elongated tonfa: tripping Tracey or blocking her attacks this way was a sure way to annoy her. Another move was, when they were far from each other, to throw his weapon at the girl and direct it through focused use of Levitation. It wasn't as efficient as when he wielded it himself, but it was distracting her nonetheless, and he could place a few martial arts moves in the meantime.

The two of them also knew how to cast spells with their blades, and used that ability liberally. Tracey had an advantage there, because of the two blades, but she wasn't as attuned to the blades as Harry was, and her spells were under-powered when compared to her wand. Conversely, Harry had to voluntarily diminish the power he put into his spells. His katana was humming with the magic, and the first Stunner he sent – and which Tracey evaded, thankfully – broke through Dumbledore's shield.

"Sorry." he exclaimed before jumping to avoid one of Tracey's attacks.

Dumbledore chuckled and re-established the shield, putting more power behind it.

On top of the usual tactics with swords, magic, and martial arts, both fighters knew how to strengthen their skin or Levitate at will, protecting themselves from real harm and bringing the fight to levels previously unheard of in that kind of competition. Literally.

When they jumped at each other and twirled in the air, still exchanging blows, the students and teachers alike could only gape in wonder. Only Dumbledore and Flamel were smiling, knowing that, thanks to her privileged relationship with the current Defence teacher, Tracey had had access to many more abilities than a regular student. Yet, seeing the two of them going at it, they strongly suspected that they kept some of these skills well hidden.

At one point during the fight, though, Harry remembered that he could do martial arts while wielding his sword and proved his point when Tracey tried to repeat her block-and-strike dual move. His right hand left the katana's hilt and struck the nerves in her left shoulder, causing the arm to go limp and drop the weapon.

She was quite shocked at this, but, after taking a few steps back, she remembered what to do in these cases and hit her own shoulder at a different point. Her arm recovered its full mobility and, after Summoning her wakizashi again, the fight continued.

After fifteen minutes of continual swordfight, the two of them started to tire.

'How about a grand exit?' Harry mentally asked while taking a few steps backwards.

'What do you mean?'

'Your skin is hardened and all?' he enquired, conveying the image of a smirk.

'Yes, but- owwf!'

Harry had already acted. As fast as he could without modifying the time flow, he had lunged at the unsuspecting girl. Then, in the same move, he firmly planted his left leg onto the platform and threw his right in a roundhouse kick in the girl's midsection, effectively sending her flying. Stopped by Dumbledore's shield, Tracey landed in a heap, struggling for breath.

She noticed Harry's katana raised towards her, and, not wanting to experience an uncomfortable period of unconsciousness, she raised her hands in defeat.

"I yield!" she exclaimed, and her eyes acquired an evil glint. "Please spare me, good sir."

"Oy! I'll see wha' I can do for ya, wench." Harry replied in his worst imitation of a pirate's accent. Half a second later, his outfit morphed to complete the illusion.

After a moment of silence – the Hall was stunned speechless – the two of them broke in laughter and Harry helped her upright.

"Well..." Dumbledore interjected when Susan was being taken care of by Madam Pomfrey – who had just awakened Luna and Seamus. "It seems that the second round goes to Professor Evans. Are we going to see the decisive match today?"

Harry held a quick mental conversation with Tracey and invited the three others in. After a while, he asked aloud – to keep appearances. "What do you think?"

"I'm alright if we stop here." Tracey replied, and the three other contestants nodded.

"I'm alright too." Harry said.

The two of them thought that they would hear a disapproving groan from the audience, but nothing came. Looking at the still shocked ranks of students, Harry understood why.

“Uh oh. We seem to have broken them.”

He waited to see if he got a reaction from that, at least. Except a few snorts, the room was still silent. When a couple students – friends enough to the group to know some of Harry’s secrets, mostly – started to clap, though, the sound woke the public and they applauded as well.

When the cheer lessened, after five full minutes, Harry spoke again. “These four bested me once. They are the first to succeed. As promised, they get 100 points each.”

“But they lost the second round!” a voice sounded from the back of the crowd.

Harry opened his mouth to answer, but another student beat him to it. “It doesn’t matter! All Houses gain the same amount!”

It was true, and it quelled the last scruples some people might have at Harry rewarding the effort.

Then, Harry and the four former contestants replayed parts of the fights to illustrate good and bad choices. The use of varied weapons was put forward, as well as Luna’s team-oriented tactic of protecting and healing. When asked about the unusual moves in the last swordfight, Harry shrugged and pointed out that enough training could bring that to anyone. Many students came to him afterwards, wanting to be included in the Bushido club.

Alas, the year was drawing to a close, and they wouldn’t have their wish.

In the parlour of a federal detainment centre, somewhere in America...

“Believe me, Dante; you’ll be much better with this behind you.”

The addressed 30-odd years old man frowned at his visitor before looking down. “That’s fine for you to say, ‘Cat. You didn’t spend the

last three years behind bars. And, to put all this behind me, as you said, you shouldn't call me by that name. Call me Kevin; Dark Dante is no more." A pause. "Are you sure the room is secure?"

"Positive." Blake Lenoir answered with a smirk. After all, what couldn't be done without magic? His privacy ward was so effective that even people able to read on lips wouldn't have anything to read. "Didn't I give you enough credentials for you to trust me?"

The prisoner nodded absently. "You know, I'm quite ready to admit everything they charged me with. But they want data about it. Data you know I hid among other sensitive information... And they don't trust me near a computer."

"Let me sum this up. You are stuck here until you plead guilty, but you can't prove anything without revealing even more dirt on yourself. Is that accurate?"

"Pretty much, yes."

Blake took a folded sheet of paper from his pocket and threw it to the prisoner, under the watchful gaze of the guard at the door.

"Is it... what I think it is?"

Blake nodding, the man took and unfolded the gift, and his eyes widened. "There's more than what I thought."

"Up-to-date information." Blake added absently.

Kevin frowned. "What do you mean? How did you access them?"

"As you know, there is nothing such as effective protection."

A pause.

"Why do you help me?"

Blake didn't answer this right away. He didn't say that it was a way to say sorry. Three years ago, he had met the man's electronic vault, and, with his habit of the time, he had spread some of its content on the web. And some people weren't really happy to learn how a single man had lorded over phone lines to accomplish many illegal things – like netting a Porsche by cheating a radio game.

“Let's say that I think you'd do better free.” He paused and tilted his head. “A free man has a better chance to court an attractive particular attorney.”

The other man blushed profusely, but smiled nonetheless. “Right.” he muttered. “You're right, of course.” Another pause while he was re-reading the data sheet. “With this, I even have some ammo against those self-righteous morons. Running undercover businesses, really.”

Blake "Copycat" Lenoir stood and took his leave of the former hacker, satisfied. With the abilities inherited from Harry, he had prodded Kevin's mind and he was sure that he was going to be a productive element of the society very soon.

Flashback: Hogwarts Great Hall, a particular evening of mid-September...

“I'm not finished.” the Headmaster said, and silence returned. “I'm not even finished with Quidditch. I seriously hope to raise Hogwarts' average skill in Quidditch, because, this year, a particular event has been scheduled on top of everything: there will be two more games of Quidditch scheduled this year, after the final exams. The House team in possession of the Hogwarts Quidditch Cup at that time will have the challenge of going against two other Quidditch teams to try to gain a special trophy for the school.”

There was a silence following these words, and, rolling her eyes at having to play the accomplice in the man's theatrics, McGonagall whispered some more words to Dumbledore's ear.

“Oh, yes.” Dumbledore said. “I forgot to tell you who you are going against. Durmstrang and Beauxbatons.” He smiled while a stunned silence welcomed his words. “I expect you to crush them.”

Three days later ...

The day was Monday, and, as specified on the notice board, it was Quidditch Day.

Thanks to their performance in the last game against Ravenclaw, Gryffindor had won the Quidditch Cup, besting Slytherin by a mere ten points. Third was Ravenclaw, forty points behind; and Hufflepuff came last with the gross score of 280. Thus, it was the Gryffindor team that was scheduled to fly against Beauxbatons today. Needless to say, they were quite nervous. It was the penultimate game for their captain, and he was betting his future career as professional Quidditch player on it.

Neville was there, too. At some point during the year, Douglas Dougal had relinquished his Coach position in favour of the younger boy, and Neville's newfound confidence helped greatly, especially in moments like this.

"Come on, team!" he exclaimed, including the reserve players as well. "You all remember how long the game against Ravenclaw lasted? Three hours and a half, almost four! Can you imagine repeating this on an empty stomach?" He paused, and straightened up. "As your Coach, I formerly order you to go to breakfast and swallow something. We have to show the other teams that we are there! And, at least," he added with a smirk, "eating will give you something to throw up."

The laughter that followed was quite uneasy, but it was laughter nonetheless, and the fifteen students left the common room.

The three Heads of the wizarding schools had decided that each of the matches was going to take place in a different school, and the shortest straw for the one to start it had been drawn by Dumbledore. The teams, along with students and staff members wanting to watch the game, were going to portkey from one school to another the day before the game. Additionally, reporters and managers of professional teams had been invited too, and many of them were going to be there.

That's why the Gryffindor team found the Great Hall jam-packed when they arrived, and only the consideration of fellow Gryffindors had kept them places to sit. Since they weren't going to play today, the students from Durmstrang had come in small numbers. Their haughty expressions and muscular builds kept everyone off their back, though, and they stayed together. Inversely, Beauxbatons students had come in numbers, and had gladly mingled with the English students. The language proved to be a barrier, but it was quickly overcome when older students threw Translation charms around.

The five Weasleys had the pleasant surprise of finding their cousins Amaury and Susannah there. However, the fact that Amaury and his girlfriend Fleur were going to play against them dampened their spirit slightly. The composition of their reserve team was quite intriguing as well: instead of having a whole team as reserve, they had a pool of players who could play any position.

Lee Jordan had tried to extract information from the Durmstrang students about their own team, but he was unsuccessful. They would later learn that the Russian school's team had no reserve players whatsoever. And they would also learn that they didn't need any.

The breakfast soon drew to a close, and, when the tables were magically cleaned, a group of Hogwarts students belonging to the music club decided to stir the competitive atmosphere. Repeatedly banging the tables twice and clapping once, they started a rhythm that most muggle-raised students knew. Especially as they began to sing. Or yell in measure.

"Buddy you're a boy, make a big noise, playin' in the street, gonna be a big man some day..."

When the refrain came, all the English students repeated the "We will rock you" theme at the top of their lungs.

In the same vein, Beauxbatons students sang a few rhymes from Tostaky, one of the latest rock albums in French. Despite the Translation charms, the English students didn't understand the lyrics,

and a good part of them reflected that their adversaries hadn't understood their message either. Whatever the case, both songs had helped raise the spirit of their respective team, and it was what counted.

After a couple of hours to get ready, everyone started to walk towards the enlarged Quidditch pitch. Since the last game, the house-elves had worked on it almost full-time, and it was now ready to host the larger-than-usual crowd. Three commentator booths had been created for the three main languages spoken in the schools, and information about how to select the commentator had been given that very morning. Lee was commenting for Hogwarts, assisted by Professor McGonagall, as usual. An excited young man was doing the job for Beauxbatons. And, apparently, nobody from Durmstrang had been interested. On Dumbledore's insistence, Harry went to their delegation and asked them, in Russian, if they wanted him to do that for them. In the same language, one of them haughtily replied that they didn't need a running commentary to ruin their view of the game.

'Cheerful fellows.' Harry thought as he was returning to his seat in the teacher's steps.

The teams were introduced – and names were pronounced incorrectly from both sides – and took flight to get their start-of-game positions. Since the game crossed frontiers, the rules were those of professional Quidditch, and Dumbledore had hired a professional referee to manage the game. Madam Pomfrey and two other Healers were also waiting on the side, potions and stretchers ready should anything happen.

And, boy, did things happen!

After a couple of warming shots at each Keeper to judge their skill, the game went into full swing. And, a dozen minutes after that, the French team drew back. Wondering, the Gryffindors barely noticed that the French Seeker was atop them, her Veela powers reaching to them.

And, when it's said that they barely noticed it, it was because they barely noticed it. The Gryffindor Chasers were female, and, unrelated to the game in any way or form, three of the four male players belonged to the small circle of Harry's friends, and they had had serious Occlumency lessons with him – even more serious than the already impressive lessons he had given in class. Only Wood seemed to drift away from his hoops a little, before raising his meagre defences and shaking his head.

Not seeing any other trap, the Gryffindors pressed their advantage, and scored a handful of times against a team that was confused about their lack of reaction to Fleur.

The part-Veela had other abilities, though, and she decided to lead Ron on a merry chase. Not having wandless Legilimency on hand, he could only follow, oscillating left and right to determine whether she was following an actual Snitch or not. She was skilled in this, though, and moved out of the way just enough to block his view. The chase ended on the ground, with Fleur executing a near-perfect Wronski Feint. It wasn't perfect because Ron didn't plough into the ground with his broom: knowing the move and having noticed the ground getting closer, Ron had jumped off his broom the moment Fleur flew off. The result was the automatic brake slamming into place, stopping the broom a mere inch from the ground. The Cushioning charm was still in place – the only stretch of professional Quidditch rules the referee had accepted – and he was in good shape. With a nod at Pomfrey and another at his Captain, Ron recovered his broom and jumped back in the fray, followed by the cheers from Hogwarts students.

The Seeker being one of the key pieces in Quidditch, both Ron and Fleur were often target of Bludgers. Their job wasn't to concentrate on the other human-controlled balls, though, and they simply flew off the way most of the time. The Keeper didn't have that chance. Once again, after having saved many goals and managing his team efficiently, Wood evaded one of the Bludgers only to get the other smacking the back of his head.

Being the reserve Keeper, Seamus was brought to the fore, and his magic fingers kept the ball out of the hoops most of the time. Thus,

even though Fleur finally managed to grasp the elusive Snitch, Hogwarts won the first game of the small tournament.

During the first hours of the afternoon, the students of Hogwarts rejoiced at their team's victory, while those of Beauxbatons celebrated their catch of the Snitch. The students of Durmstrang didn't cheer anyone, and several people had the eerie feeling that they wouldn't even cheer their own team.

The next game was the next day, and it was pitting Durmstrang against Beauxbatons, the match being held in the French school. Around five in the afternoon, the students wanting to attend congregated in the Great Hall, where Dumbledore and the two Headmistresses from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang had spelled a roll of rope into a portkey. The rope was then unrolled on the tables, where everyone could take a hold of it. When everyone was ready, the Headmaster activated the magical mean of transportation. Since there were as many Hogwarts students wanting to visit the French school than there had been visiting students from Beauxbatons, almost 400 persons disappeared, only to reappear at their destination – the Ceremony Room of the Renaissance-like castle in southern France.

There, the visiting students were shown to their dormitories and the school settled for the night.

Most of it.

Because of the added number of students and the inherently greater possibilities of mischief, some of the harshest staff members had required that the curfew be tightly enforced, and that's why Harry was patrolling the halls with his French counterpart, the local teacher of Defence Against the Dark Arts, Professor Bataille. Contrarily to his English-only colleagues, Harry was able to actually talk with him, and the two of them discussed tactics and strategy even after the end of their patrol. Bataille was suitably impressed by Harry's indiscriminate use of muggle means and Harry learnt much about warfare strategy. Rediscovering that he knew Dumbledore was skilled in this as well, he resolved to ask the old man to assist at least once in the Defence curriculum.

After discovering and scolding a few students, and meeting other patrols on the way, the two Defence teachers returned to their quarters for the night. The whole time, Harry had been the only one with magical glasses, and, since each patrol had a specific part of the castle to check, no one noticed the Durmstrang players reaching the dorm for their French counterparts and cast spells on them.

The next morning, the visiting students were treated to a full breakfast, and everyone could eat what they wanted. Ron stayed true to the English breakfast, while Tracey and several others tried the coffee-and-croissant instead. In a repeat procedure of the day before, the French school intoned a warring chant to cheer their players. Contrarily to the previous day, though, Durmstrang students didn't answer, merely shrugging and conversing between themselves in Russian.

The match came soon enough, and the fourteen players took the air, the Durmstrang students in black and their hosts in pastel blue. The referee from the day before was continuing his job, as did the commentators – or lack thereof.

The match started normally enough, and both team accumulated a few dozen points each, before strange things happened. All of a sudden, the Chasers from Beauxbatons became clumsy, their Beaters inaccurate, and their Keeper sloppy-handed. It didn't last more than a few minutes, but the Russian team took advantage of it to push their advantage and score several times. When that happened again, several onlookers started to boo at the French team, and some of them even had doubts about their actual ability to play. Thinking that something was amiss, Harry tried to find an answer by entering the Keeper's mind. And what he found there compelled him to act: the teenager's mind was held under the Imperius curse, and he was obeying discreet orders by the Captain of the Durmstrang team. Harry didn't see who cast the curse, but he could work on disabling it, before doing the same for the other players – he just didn't want victims of an Unforgivable being led to a crushing defeat because of it.

The next time the order came, the Russian team was surprised to find a higher resistance from their opponents, and they reverted to a more

openly brutal style of play. Deliberately throwing Bludgers at people, grabbing their adversaries' brooms or kicking them, they played at the extreme limit of what was authorized in professional Quidditch. The French students were quickly overwhelmed, and the Keeper was soon forcefully removed from the game and compelled to spend a long time in the infirmary.

A reserve player quickly took the departed Keeper's place, but that didn't change the Russians' play style. Unfortunately for Beauxbatons, their adversaries were used to attacking and defending using all the available moves from professional Quidditch, and, each time a French tried to shove the other players out of their way, they were thrown to the side instead.

An hour into the game, the black-clad players were already leading by 300 points and their counterparts couldn't find a way around their vicious moves. The real fight began when the Snitch showed itself, though: like it had been the case in several games previously, the losing team put all their resources into the chase, neglecting the Quaffle. Even though, Bludgers and opposing players sent the players away, and it was only by a stroke of luck that the Seeker – it wasn't Fleur, as the part-Veela had been downed earlier on – caught the Snitch.

Despite winning by fifty points, the Russian players were quite miffed at having lost the Snitch and their faces showed their disappointment and anger. Nobody came to appease them, though: their reaction and usual haughtiness had made it so that everybody shunned them. Still concerned about the Imperius, Harry checked with Dumbledore, but there has been no proof of the Durmstrang players having cheated and they couldn't hold them responsible. Wary of what could happen, Harry decided to spend the rest of the time until the game with the team. And, to be as discreet as possible, he did so as a teenager again: after discussing about the game with Seamus, the two of them decided that it would be better for him to replace the Irish boy.

Fewer students decided to go to Durmstrang. The French had little to do there, and, instead of being 150-odd students, only 30 or so came, either to visit the place or cheer on the game. Most of the students from Hogwarts came, though. With 200 people travelling by portkey, the spell was easier to cast for the heads of the three schools, and

everyone soon found themselves in the cold hallways of the Durmstrang Institute of Magic.

For the visiting students, it appeared that the Russian players' attitude hadn't been rehearsed for the occasion, as almost all students there were giving them the cold shoulder. Even more than that, they were doing so towards each other as well. In Seamus' guise – the Irish boy had been morphed into a nondescript student from Hogwarts –, Harry explored the Russian minds in the same way he did the ancient institution's corridors.

It appeared that one of the goals of Durmstrang was to harden their members, "survival of the fittest" seeming to be their hidden motto. The castle was scarcely heated and the meals were often including mostly rare meat. The staff and students alike shunned the students incapable of being moulded following that rule, and the very few outgoing and cheerful students Harry met in his exploration were stigmatized by their peers. Some even had scars.

With the school's objectives in mind, Harry recognized that they had played Quidditch accordingly, and he wondered if his own team was going to survive the encounter. Durmstrang didn't have an infirmary, for instance, and he doubted that Quidditch-related wounds would be occurring to anyone but the English team.

It was quite late when he went to sleep, all these dark thoughts swirling in his mind.

A mere couple of hours later, he was awakened by the entrance of several students, who immediately started to throw the same curse left and right. Harry knew the spell, since it was one of the Unforgivables, and he let them do it, as did the other team members. Most of them were close friends of his with sturdy mental defences, and all of them had been warned about the possibility of this treachery happening.

Of course, if the trespassing students had had bloodier intentions, the visiting team would have reacted otherwise.

The rest of the night was uneventful, and the Gryffindors awoke to find Harry using Conjuraton and Transfiguration to create a solid breakfast. Since they knew that their Imperius-related orders had been to sleep late and miss breakfast, they had no qualm to lunge at the tantalizing food eagerly.

An hour later, the game started and the fourteen players were flying in the cold morning air. Contrarily to their previous game, though, the Russian players quickly noticed that their usual moves weren't working anymore. From the sidelines, Harry was directing his friends efficiently, all scruples about cheating put at ease by the fact that the black-clad players had tried to control them even before the match. And with Unforgivables, no less.

Seeing that their underhanded spellcasting had failed somehow, the black-clad players returned to their violent play and started to off players again. Once again, Oliver Wood was target by several balls at the same time, and some players went actually as far as striking him bodily while the referee was looking in the other direction. Despite being quite robust and giving back as much as he received, the large Hogwarts graduate wasn't used to such brutality, and his exhaustion caused him to fail to notice the Seeker heading his way from behind. Instead of having his head smashed, though, it was his very spine that got struck, this time, and he fell on the cold and un-Cushioned rocky ground, earning himself a couple of broken bones. Since Madam Pomfrey was accompanying the team on that inter-school tour, she rushed to the fallen player's side in seconds and started to work her magic on him, all the time muttering about homicidal teens.

The Gryffindors didn't even have the possibility of calling a recess, since that was the Captain's prerogative. Harry had anticipated this, though. He had jumped on his broom as soon as Wood was struck and had zoomed towards the hoops as soon as the fallen captain had touched the ground – any sooner than that was against the rules.

With his many powers, it was easier to block the Quaffle, and Harry had no desire to let the ball pass. From that moment, the Durmstrang team didn't score at all. The players who approached from behind with the intentions of knocking him out were met by his hardened body, thrown backwards so casually that no one could tell if it was

voluntarily. Bludgers thrown to him were either evaded or ignored, his toughened skin not even bruising because of them – and he even caught a few of them and threw them to disrupt the opposing team's play. The Durmstrang Beaters took a "liking" in him and started to continually sending the heavy balls at him. On one of these occasions, Harry was occupied with tracking the Quaffle and the other players, and he decided to simply ignore the incoming Bludger, knowing that its trajectory was such that it wouldn't harm him.

And harm him it didn't... it struck his broom instead. Spot on.

The charms keeping the broom in the air unravelled and Harry dropped a few feet, before his instincts kicked in and he Levitated himself and the broom back in place. In the meantime, though, the Quaffle had passed the right hoop and the Durmstrang players smirked – their version of cheering.

From then on, Harry had a more difficult time moving around, but, just as he blocked the Quaffle for the third time after the broom incident, he noticed the Durmstrang Seeker moving stealthily in a particular direction.

‘Ron!’ he called. ‘The Snitch!’

The redhead shot after his counterpart, and the two of them chased the fluttering ball around the pitch. Since Durmstrang was currently losing, their Seeker was desperate to get the ball before his red-haired opponent, and he kicked him to the side several times. Ron's smaller frame proved to be a liability, then, as one of these pushes made his course intersect the hoop poles.

He fell to the ground and was quickly treated by Madam Pomfrey while his replacement shot in the air from the sidelines. Ginny Weasley was by no mean a stronger player than her brother, but her starting position proved to be an advantage, especially as she had been on her broom already, ready to zoom into action. Just as her twin brothers were forcing the black-clad Seeker to swerve out of the way with a well-targeted Bludger, she crossed the path of the golden ball and grasped it in her small fingers.

Calculating the points in his head, Harry was surprised to find that Hogwarts and Durmstrang had exactly the same number of points. The results of the three games were, in order, 250-230 for Hogwarts, 390-240 for Durmstrang, and 340-200 for Hogwarts.

Visibly, Dumbledore and his Russian counterpart had made the same computation and were discussing about what to do. The Headmistress of Durmstrang thought that, having gained more points on their exterior game, they should be rewarded with the trophy, and she ignored Dumbledore's pleas about Hogwarts having gained more games. After several minutes, Dumbledore managed to grab her and whisper something in her ear. Paling, she reluctantly agreed to the proposition from Madame Maxime, the Headmistress of Beauxbatons: shoot penalties, one Chaser against one Keeper, until three were scored.

The commentators explained the circumstances to the teams and the audience, and the teams prepared themselves for the unusual end of game. Despite the fact that Keeper was his position of choice, Harry didn't want to be disadvantaged by his broom, and he Levitated himself to the ground to exchange his broom for a functional one. The two teams started to exchange shots at the guarded hoops. It was only after half an hour that the Gryffindor Chasers succeeded in throwing the last winning throw, and the 150 Hogwarts supporters cheered their players heartily.

Despite having won, it annoyed Harry that Durmstrang could have won the whole tournament by cheating. He had a faint idea about what Dumbledore had told his Russian counterpart, though, and he smirked. At the same time, it also reminded him that the sum of points in a tournament such as this one, like Hogwarts' own Quidditch Cup, was more important than the number of games won. Actually winning a tournament meant that one had an actual strategy instead of simple game-related tactics – the parallel with his Defence course was easy.

Thoughts of strategy reminded him about Voldemort too: where was he in his fight with the Dark Lord?

It was with that question in his mind that he took the portkey back to England.

That Friday evening...

As usual, the Leaving Feast was impressive, with mountains of food to devour. No one was eating yet, though, as they were waiting the customary revelation of this year's winners of the House Cup. It wasn't much of a suspense: the students having two brain cells to rub together had already added the known results of the Quidditch Cup with the House points displayed in coloured hourglasses in the Entrance Hall.

Dumbledore confirmed their computations quickly. "Welcome for the Leaving feast," he intoned. "As is the case each year, many proficient students will leave these walls, leaving the place for younger ones to come next September. Our graduated students will be honoured after the Feast, but I can already tell you several things." A pause. "Well, you know it already, but the winner for the Quidditch Cup is Gryffindor. Can the team come forward?"

The Headmaster gave the large cup to the ecstatic team, who showed it to the room proudly. The Gryffindor table cheered, while the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws clapped politely. Almost no Slytherin moved a finger. After the team finished moving the cup around, they gave it to McGonagall, their Head of House, and Dumbledore spoke again.

"In addition to this honour, this distinguished team has fought valiantly against the best players of the two largest magical schools in Europe... and won!" In the applause coming from the whole room, Dumbledore tried to say that he was going to present them with the trophy but the sound was already deafening and he gave another cup to the Gryffindors.

It took another dozen minutes to lower the rejoicing to a manageable level, and, after dismissing the Quidditch players, Dumbledore continued his speech. "I know that some of you have made calculations about who'd get the House Cup. Others have only made suppositions. I happen to know that some of you were wrong while others were correct." Dumbledore paused, taking a parchment from

his pocket. "In fourth place with 280 points obtained in Quidditch and 838 points for their academic realizations, I give you... Hufflepuff!"

The house of Loyalty cheered, even if they knew that they low score in Quidditch was handicapping them greatly in the run for the House Cup.

"With 900 and 812 points, a particular house is... ex aequo with another who has 890 and 822 points. I give you... Gryffindor and Slytherin."

The two age-long enemies cheered at the same time, and the sight was so unnerving that they stopped almost instantly. They did have the same score, after all, and the applause resumed, although it was a little subdued.

"And, with 860 and 947 points, the winner for the House Cup is Ravenclaw!" Dumbledore exclaimed, his last words drowned in the cheer from the concerned students.

When the commotion died down, he had only a couple of words for the students: "Now... dig in!"

And they did.

The next day saw, as usual, the chaotic boarding up of the return train to London. The Hogwarts Express was majestic as ever, seemingly unperturbed by the agitation around it.

Most of these students were coming back from nine months of hard labour and learning, with a fuller head than when they arrived. Some of them, however, had lost memories in the way. And several specific individuals had had a mind-updating session the previous night, storing their Light-aligned memories in the Headmaster's pensieve – said Headmaster storing them in carefully labelled containers afterwards.

The only thing that Theodore Nott and his Slytherin friends were bringing "home" and that wasn't school-related was the little

mosquito-like mind virus that Harry had perfected again. Among other tasks, it made sure that absolutely nothing remained of the removed memories.

Because of the attack on Hogsmeade, everyone knew that there were still dark wizards at large, and the train had been heavily warded by the teachers and a couple of persons outside the school. On top of that, at least one adult was going to be present in each carriage – including a few Aurors.

When the train left the station, everyone thought that the ride would be safe. They didn't know that the dark wizards would use the opportunity to spread terror some more.

Despite all the precautions taken, the train was effectively ambushed in the middle of its trip, by several trees fallen across the tracks. It was only thanks to the numerous additional charms on it that the locomotive wasn't destroyed on impact. The train was stopped rather forcefully, though, causing an infernal noise. Everyone was swept off their feet and knocked to the sides of their compartments, some students falling badly or passing out. Or both. Those who were in the corridors fell and rolled head over heels to the corridor's front end.

When the noise stopped, an eerie silence descended upon the train, only broken by sniffles and cries of fear or pain.

Harry was stationed near the start of the train, and he was one of the few not falling down. He immediately tried to Apparate, only to find the gaseous reality blocked. He lost a few seconds trying several identities from Death Eaters he knew before guessing that it was either tied to something he didn't have or just a plain ward not linked to anything.

In his few seconds of thoughts, nothing untoward happened and he wondered if someone had pressed the "emergency halt" buttons scattered along the train. Yanking a side door open and looking outside, he immediately noticed that it didn't have anything to do with such an accidental stop.

Wizards were posted near the end of the train, and they were opening fire on the carriages there, while slowly advancing towards the middle. Visibly, they hadn't thought that the train would continue advancing through the barrage before stopping.

What Harry didn't know, though, was that there were fewer guards in the last carriages than was scheduled. One of them was Tonks, and she had managed to break an arm and fall unconscious. Another was Flitwick. The last one was Flamel.

The diminutive teacher had been doing his best to protect the students, but there were simply too many enemies and he had been put under the Cruciatus a couple of times before being hit with a Bone-breaking curse and a Petrifying hex at the same time. The result was rather painful – for him and for anyone noticing his condition.

That left Flamel. And, despite being powerful and knowledgeable, Nicholas Flamel had sworn not to harm any sentient life. The ancient alchemist was casting shields on himself and on the train, and was sidestepping or conjuring obstacles to deflect the unblockable curses thrown his way.

Harry jumped on the train roof – it was more even than the rocky ground – and ran to his mentor, Disillusioning himself on the way.

On his way, he noticed that a few adult guards had come outside and were firing at the attackers already. Through opened windows, the bravest and most knowledgeable students were opening fire as well. As he finally reached Flamel, he noticed that his old master was suddenly panting, as if struck by Merlin-knows-why curse. It wasn't the case, though.

The man's main defence against Unforgivables was to conjure walls, and he didn't know that, hidden by the undergrowth, a few Death Eaters had morphed into their snake Animagus shape and slithered towards him.

One of them had had the misfortune of being in the area of effect of a conjured wall, and he died almost instantly.

The ancient alchemist knew at once that his oath had been broken, and, feeling his magic leave him, he decided to make a good use of what he had. Throwing a last glance at his apprentice, one that conveyed regret at leaving him but defiance at their foe, the old man raised his wand a last time and opened his magic reserve, pouring it all out before it was depleted by the result of his broken oath.

The result was a blinding light which travelled towards the six Death Eaters still in front of him, and which obliterated them and the trees nearby. Nothing would remain from the immediate vicinity.

Noticing this, the remaining dark wizards thought that the Light side had invented a new kind of weapon, and they Apparated out.

The "new weapon" was taking its last breaths, though. Lying in Harry's arms, Flamel was painfully drawing oxygen to his failing body.

"Harry..." he tried to say, but blood came to his mouth and he coughed.

"You didn't have to do that." Harry said. He hadn't noticed the dying snake, and thought that Flamel had done his last attack only to help defeat the Death Eaters.

"Was... already... dying." Flamel coughed again. "Oath." he explained, nodding at the dead snake nearby. He then turned his already glassy eyes upwards and grabbed Harry's robe in a last attempt to straighten up. With his last breath, he whispered a last word to his ear.

"Memoirs." Harry heard, before the man that had lived for more than six centuries, his mentor and friend, Nicholas Flamel fell back, dead.

"I'll avenge you, old friend." Harry muttered, his eyes prickling, before feeling two arms wrapping around him from the side. Grasping Tracey against him, he surrendered to his grief and cried for the first time in a long while.

After several long minutes, a gentle hand landed on his shoulder. "Professor Flitwick has been portkeyed to St Mungo, and the track has been cleared." Kinglsey Shackbolt said gently. "What is it you want us to do?"

"Go." Harry said simply. "I will... I'll take care of him."

'Do you want me to go, too?' Tracey asked mentally.

Still holding the deceased man, he turned to her. 'No. Stay, please.'

'I wouldn't have left you anyways.' she replied.

"Is the anti-Apparation field removed?" Harry asked to the black Auror, who nodded.

Harry nodded back, and, wordlessly, he Disapparated, along with Tracey and Flamel's body.

The three of them reappeared in a graveyard flanking a small church. Harry searched for some time, until he found his target: a single slab of white marble, a fresh rose resting upon it.

"That's Perenelle's grave." Harry breathed. "And now it's his."

Working from pebbles close by, a gold Galleon, and branches from a nearby tree, Harry created a truly beautiful coffin where he put his mentor to rest. Since the man's wand had burnt because of the energy spent through it, Harry took the one wand he possessed that belonged to the dead alchemist and laid it in his friend's cold fingers. He finally straightened the man's clothes. He knew no one who had been buried in shabby clothes.

Taking a step back, he looked at his friend for a last time before sealing the coffin. Then, with a wave of his wand, he opened the marble slab and Levitated Nicholas Flamel to his resting place.

"Rest in peace, master." he said as the white marble returned to its initial place. "You earned it. And more. Much more."

With Tracey at his side, he cried again, his body slowly returning to its normal aspect.

It was only an hour later that he was ready to go. "Thank you." he said to the closed tomb. "For everything."

The two magical teenagers then disappeared, unconcerned about the surprised locals.

On the tomb, a white rose was intertwined with the red one that had been there.

Harry and Tracey landed in their bedroom of their house in Newcastle. Harry immediately looked at his girlfriend intently. "Thank you, Trace. He really was someone for me. Thanks for having stayed."

"You're welcome." she started to answer, before he leaned in and kissed her.

It stayed chaste and they separated slowly afterwards. While Harry closed his eyes to sleep his emotional exhaustion away, Tracey sensed something on her lips.

It was salty.

It was tears.

One hour and twenty-seven minutes later, Harry awoke with a start. It took him a few seconds to remember everything that had happened before, and he wondered why he had felt such an urge to wake up.

Seeing Tracey entering the room, he remembered.

"The train!" he exclaimed.

"What about it?" she asked. "Last thing I remember about it, you were telling Auror Shacklebolt to go."

“Come with me?” he asked, extending his hand. “I’ll tell you on our way.”

She agreed and the two of them Apparated out and headed towards London.

“First of all, there’s our trunks there.” Harry started. “But there’s also a couple of students of whom I want to know the whereabouts.”

“Nott and Parkinson?”

Harry nodded. “And their... friends.”

A few minutes later, they entered the gaseous reality of King’s Cross station and hurried towards platform 9¾. The train had already arrived, and several people were on the platform already. Harry sensed around and noticed Nott and his friends already congregated around an adult he didn’t know.

“You take care of the luggage?” he asked Tracey, not losing sight of his prey.

“Alright. Meet you here or at home?”

“At home. I think it’s closer to their destination. Give our friends my regards.”

“Will do.” she replied, before noticing that Nott and his group of friends had left. “Go, now!”

Harry hadn’t waited for her order, and he was already tailing the travelling group of students. Given their travelling method, it seemed that they had a portkey: portkeys were charmed items allowing the Apparation of a large group of people at once. It was also quicker, but only because everyone in the travelling group was whirling around in the gaseous reality. For an unknown reason, that speeded up the trip.

Harry didn't care about that, though. He had long since learnt how to go really fast in the gaseous reality, and he was able to follow the group quite efficiently.

He had to stop, though, when he felt the border of a large anti-Apparation area. Not only was it quite large, but it also reeked of evilness. Once again, Harry tried to change his identity but it didn't change anything and he guessed that it had something to do with the Death Eaters' mark. And he wasn't ready to get branded by Voldemort just to enter.

If he ever got close enough to the Dark Lord to get branded, he could as well try to kill him. Again.

Besides, he could always Apparate in and walk there, couldn't he?

That's what he did.

Or, rather, that's what he tried to do: once back in tangibility, he noticed... that nothing could be noticed. In front of him was a vacant lot, a little larger than the magical ward preventing entry.

Since he didn't see anyone there, he knew that there was more than an anti-Apparation ward in effect. Perhaps even a Fidelius. Harry sensed his surroundings magically, and it confirmed his hunch: he clearly sensed a large area covered by spherical wards, and inside these were several personal auras – although these were blurred by the wards, making their owner indistinguishable. Fortunately – or not –, having experienced one of them against his own house in Geneva, Harry knew of ways to bypass Fidelius-like charms.

He resolved to ask Powell about it as soon as it was manageable, and, after memorizing the place in order to be able to come back later, he headed back home.

In the meantime, Tracey had Apparated inside the compartment she had been occupying during the train ride, only to find her trunk gone. Leaving the train and grabbing her pendant, she immediately called the person who had been with her during the first half of the ride.

‘Hermione, I'm back in the train. Where are you?’

There was no answer at first: she was better at sending than receiving mental messages; it was only because Harry could send messages as well as receiving them that the two of them could discuss in that way. But a girl crossed the magical doorway and quickly spotted her in the emptying platform.

“Hey!”

“Hermione!” the Slytherin girl called.

“How is Harry?” Hermione asked intently. “How are you, by the way?”

“Thanks for your concern.” she replied acerbically, before smiling. “I’m alright. Harry is... he was sad.”

“Was?”

“Yeah.” Tracey said. ‘He’s after Nott right now.’

Hermione’s lips made a silent O before moving again. “He doesn’t stop, does he?”

Tracey shook her head and the two of them stayed silent for a few seconds.

“Oh, before I forget!” Hermione exclaimed, and she handed two match-sized blocks of wood. “Your trunks.” she elaborated. “I wonder how I’d carry mine if I didn’t have the secondary wand we bought in Switzerland.”

“It’s a pity, really.” Tracey concurred. “These charms should be included in the default trunks sold to first years.”

Hermione nodded enthusiastically and opened her mouth to add something when a stray thought came to her. “My parents!”

“What about them?”

“I left them when I heard your mental call.”

“You should go, then.”

“What about you?”

Tracey smirked. “Me? I’ll go home too.”

“Newcastle?” Hermione asked, remembering a discussion the group of Harry’s friends had had some months ago. When Tracey nodded, she smiled. “Take care of you. And of him.”

“Will do, chief!” the Slytherin girl saluted, before the two of them dissolved in giggles.

After a last hug, the two of them departed, heading to their respective homes.

I need information about where I can buy the same kind of automatic gun turrets that demolished our house.

Harry surveyed the message he was ready to send. After a few seconds, he added "Please." and sent it.

Tracey arrived at the same moment.

“Everything’s fine?” they asked at the same time, before chuckling.

“Plenty of wards.” Harry started. “I couldn’t pass or even see through them.”

Tracey nodded. The fact that Harry hadn’t been in a scuffle had an added bonus of him being whole and healthy, and she wasn’t going to complain about that.

“Hermione had taken our stuff out of the train.” she said to answer his own question. She proceeded in taking the reduced trunks and

enlarging them. "Here we are." she added with an odd light in her eyes. "Ready to settle down."

Harry nodded, smirking. The irony of that particular sentence wasn't lost to him. "I hope so." he replied. "Just don't forget that he's not dead yet."

He didn't have to tell her who he was speaking about, and she acquiesced. "Will it ever end?" she asked, hugging him.

"Soon. I-"

His sentence was interrupted by a discreet ping coming from his communication booklet. "Ah. Answers." he joked. When he went to read what he thought was Powell's answer to his previous message, he frowned.

"What is it?"

"It's Dumbledore."

"...well? What does he want?"

Harry looked at her. "He wants me."

"You?"

"He wants "Harry Potter" to help him recruit a replacement. For... Nicholas."

A pause.

"Why would he need you?"

Harry shrugged. "He doesn't say."

"Well... ask him, then." she said, walking towards the kitchen to fix themselves something to eat.

“There’s more.” Harry called back. “He wants both of us to go to Hogwarts.”

Another pause.

“Let me guess... he doesn’t say why?”

“You win.”

“Very well. When?”

“Now.”

She frowned, before nodding. “Alright. There’s nothing to eat anyways and it’s Saturday afternoon.”

“Meaning?”

“The groceries are packed right now, and house-elves’ meals are better.”

He smiled. “Hogwarts should include a course about magically-produced meals.”

Trying to suppress her giggles, she frowned. “Do you mean I’m a poor housewife, Mr Potter?”

His expression mirroring hers, he approached her and hugged her. “I think that, if that’s your choice, you’ll do a wonderful housewife.” He kissed her. “Mrs Potter.”

A stunned pause.

“Is that a proposal?” she asked softly.

“Well... I don’t have a ring, but-”

His next words were drowned by her lips kissing his.

Almost a minute later, they were interrupted by a soft ping.

“Damn.” she breathed.

“And you kiss me with those lips?” Harry asked mockingly, before evading a slap on the arm. He looked at the booklet again. “Seems that our illustrious headmaster is in a hurry.”

“Let me guess... he wants us now?”

Harry held his hand forward. “Shall we, my lady?”

“Why, indubitably, good sir.” she replied, holding his hand while trying to suppress a chuckle.

They were quickly whisked away.

Dumbledore was just closing the communication booklet when the two teenagers appeared out of thin air. Despite his aged and saddened countenance, he welcomed them warmly.

“Ah, Harry. And Tracey. Good to see you.”

“You requested the two of us, sir?” Harry asked.

“Yes. First of all, I want you to tell me what happened in the train.”

Harry understood that the man had just lost his mentor as well, and, in a sober tone, he retold how Flamel met his demise and where he had been buried. Dumbledore nodded along, his expression inscrutable.

When Harry finished speaking, the old man closed his eyes and breathed deeply. When they opened again, the two teenagers knew that his grief had been put to the side for the time being.

“Before we go into the subject of your call, Headmaster,” Harry began, “How is Professor Flitwick?”

“Filius is in St Mungo, and the Healers have succeeded in stabilizing him. He will need a few weeks to heal completely, but he’ll recover in time for school.”

“Thanks.” Harry nodded.

“I have something to ask you, Harry. I already had contact with a former Potion Master and Professor before... before Nicholas took the spot. But the man I’m talking about had a particular request to be complied with before he would accept.” A pause. “That request was that he’d teach you.”

“What?” Harry asked, dumbfounded. “Why would he want something like that? Is he a Death Eater?” he asked, his eyes hardening.

Dumbledore raise his hands. “No, he’s not. You see, Horace likes to know the "important" people in the wizarding world – his name is Horace Slughorn, by the way. To each man his own folly.” he added with a renewed twinkle in his eyes. “Seriously, now. Horace thrives on social circles, and he spent a good portion of his time here promoting the people with talent.”

Harry was frowning, his previous accusation not forgotten. “Since he loves high society, he must have met all the pure-blooded Death Eater, right?”

“It is possible, Harry. But Horace was also hunted by the Death Eaters when Voldemort came to power. That’s why he left in a hurry and why Severus took his place as Potion Master and Slytherin Head of House.”

“Why?”

“As I said, he promoted people with talent, and, more often than not, these were muggleborns. It seems that, being plunged in an unknown world, the muggleborns work harder to get recognition, and they eventually surpass the purebloods. But I digress.” A pause. “If it can help you in your decision, Harry, know that two particular people you

know about belonged to Horace's little club and you will surely like to chat about them."

Harry looked at the Headmaster shrewdly, trying to intercept revealing thoughts about the two people in question. Dumbledore was occluding his mind, though, and the only thing he could get from the old man was an infuriating smile.

"Who?"

"Humour an old man, Harry, and guess."

A pause. "My parents?"

"Yes... and no."

Harry huffed. "You speak in riddles, Headmaster."

"And that's the second one."

Another pause. Harry rewound the conversation, before shaking his head. "You're barmy, you know."

"I try to live up to my reputation." Dumbledore said. "Do you want a lemon sherbet?"

Not derailed by the non sequitur, Harry frowned. "So... I can ask that Horace person about Voldemort. Now, which of my parents were you talking about? Oh, yes. Muggleborns, you said. My mother, right?"

"Right in one." the old man said, before leaning forward. "Do you agree, then?"

Harry exhaled loudly before acquiescing. "Alright."

"Perfect! Do you have your travelling bags?"

"Travelling bags?" asked Tracey, who had been silent until now.

“Horace is hiding in America. We are going a-hunting, and it may take a while. That’s why I asked for the two of you to come. I surmise you don’t want to be separated, now that the school has ended.”

The two teenagers blushed slightly, but they nodded nonetheless.

“When?” Harry enquired.

“As soon as you’re ready.”

Harry and Tracey looked at each other. “If you can ask the house-elves to fix a light meal, we can be here in less than an hour.” Harry said. “That should be enough to pack our trunks accordingly and to send a couple messages home.”

“Alright. I believe my Hanky has everything you might want to eat.”

A pause. This time, Dumbledore made no secret the real meaning of his words – Hanky was his house-elf, not his handkerchief.

“You are really barmy, Albus.”

The old man’s answer was a wide grin, and the two teens left to pack. When they arrived, Harry threw a side glance to his booklet, but stopped when he noticed that his spy friend had answered.

I’m at Genni’s.

Harry thought about it before turning to Tracey. “Powell has information for me. You prefer to stay packing or to come with me?”

She walked to him, pouting. When he tried to think of another option, she stood on her toes and kissed him. “Promise you’ll stay fine.”

“I promise.”

“Go, then. I’ll pack your stuff and send a message to Dumbledore saying that something has come up.”

“Did I tell you that I loved you?” Harry asked.

It had started as a jest, but he noticed that Tracey was quite moved by his words. “Not recently, no. And not in so many words.” she replied.

“I do love you, though.” he said, before pecking her lips again. “Smack me each day I forget to tell you.”

Her mood lightened and she smirked. “Alright.” she replied simply, and Harry realized that he might have bitten off more than he could chew.

With a last goodbye, he Apparated to Switzerland. Harry and Powell spent half an hour discussing about the requirements of the turret, where to find one, and how to operate it. After taking the appropriate memories, Harry Apparated to a MI-6 controlled warehouse in London. Once there, staying in the gaseous reality, he used a Duplication charm to get a copy of such a turret. This done, he shrunk the weapon and proceeded to do the same with the ammunition boxes.

Equipped as though he was going to war – which he was, actually –, Harry hurled himself through space again and landed in Little Hangleton, the town where Nott and his friends were hiding. After searching an empty place to place the turret, Harry prepared it and dropped it in front of the anti-Apparation ward. Then, still hiding most of his body in the gaseous reality, he activated it.

It was a good thing that he was intangible.

The first bullet fired at the hidden place slowed as soon as it met the wards’ edge and a humming sound started to resonate. Crackling bolts of energy, a sickly kind of yellow in colour, appeared around the protected place and congregated around the slowly falling piece of metal. A feeling of dread crept up Harry’s spine as he noticed the bolts’ behaviour: it was as if they were sniffing the bullet, trying to guess where it came from.

Realization struck him, and he had just the time to cast a powerful physical shield around the turret before the yellow bolts hurried on the projectile's path. When they found the still-firing turret, Harry had finished casting the shield and was Apparating his wand out.

And the turret exploded.
Hi again, Max,

First of all, thanks for your information. Everything was exactly where you said it was and I magically copied one of the turrets there. No one saw me.

The turret worked, but the enemy had stronger wards. I think it was a physical protection barrier accompanied with another one tracing the projectiles to their source and exploding said source.

Sorry about the magical words... My ears are still ringing from the explosion and I needed to put all that on paper to straighten my thoughts. Don't worry, I'm fine. I even cleaned up behind me so no one will find rogue MI-6 material lying in a street.

Any ideas?

Gotta go, now. Recruitment mission for the Headmaster. In America.
Duh!

H.P.
H.P.

Just a thought: how far were you from the barrier? Perhaps, if you were farther, the thing wouldn't have found you.

I will scour my contacts and give you more ideas later.

Stay safe,
Max

Albus Dumbledore looked up, startled, when the fireplace came to life. In his preparations for leaving the country, he had established the usual wards on it, and very few people could connect to it right now.

When he noticed who it was who crossed the threshold, though, he jumped to his feet.

“Oliver!” he greeted the old wandmaker.

“Albus!” his visitor answered. “I’m ready, now.”

The two of them settled down and Dumbledore spoke first, voluntarily ignoring the fact that another presence had just arrived.

“I didn’t think that you would be so quick in straightening your affairs. Is your shop closed and all?”

“Yes. Because of Riddle’s last visit, I know the shops aren’t safe, and it would be a blow to our cause for him to take possession of my stock of wands.” Oliver Ollivander patted his pocket, where a shrunk vault was stored. A vault full of wands and of the wandmaker’s paraphernalia. “Despite this, I wanted to stay true to my first vocation of granting access to magic to youngsters.”

“I remember your previous call.” Dumbledore said, nodding. “I have made it so a set of rooms is reserved for your private use. We will take time, this summer, to organize the Sorting Feast so that our first years will be fitted with a wand at the same time.”

“It could take some time. Days, even. If we are to fit every first-year at the same period.”

“Don’t worry, we will plan accordingly.” A pause. “Now, I believe you want to settle down and rebuild a proper testing room.”

“I believe you made good use of the one in Diagon Alley, Albus.”

“I remember, old friend. I remember. Woody!” the Headmaster called, turning to the side.

A house-elf appeared in a crack and Dumbledore told him to direct Ollivander to his new quarters.

“I will be gone for a few days.” the Headmaster told his visitor as they were both heading to the door.

“Ah, yes? How soon?”

“This evening, in fact. Feel free to call Woody for your basic needs, and ask him to direct you to Minerva McGonagall for anything else.”

“Alright, Albus. Pleasant trip.”

“Thank you, old friend. Thank you.”

After closing the door, Dumbledore turned towards his office. “You heard everything?”

Two people shimmered into view. “Pretty much, yes.” Harry replied.

“How did you know we were there?” Tracey asked.

“I think you stopped yourselves just before Apparating in, but just by that.” the old man replied, holding his hand up with the tips of his thumb and index finger almost touching. “I felt the air moving.” A pause. “So, what do you think? And what had come up, as you told me?”

Harry retold his little experience with the turret and the reasons behind his choice. Despite not knowing exactly what the engine was, Dumbledore had a good visualization of war machines thanks to his own experience and he frowned.

“It’s a good thing that nothing happened to you, this time.” he scolded Harry. “But remember that the next time, there could be

damage done unto you or innocent witnesses. You should be accompanied.”

Harry relented and Dumbledore smiled warmly. Even if Dumbledore had no tie to tie Harry down, he hoped that his advice would be valued by the young man in front of him.

“Concerning the wands,” Tracey spoke up, “I think that Mr Ollivander should meet a colleague of him.” she finished, looking at Harry, and the boy nodded.

“What do you mean?” the Headmaster enquired.

“There are means to accelerate the choosing of one’s wand.” she replied. “It will be up to the two wandmakers to decide to spread the idea or not, though.” She turned to Harry. “I don’t think Mrs Klein would like her spell to be disclosed too just anyone or without compensation.”

Harry nodded. “When we’ll be back, I’ll see her.”

They fell into a comfortable silence, only broken by Dumbledore a few seconds later.

“Am I correct to assume that you found a wandmaker outside England, hence having untraced wands? And that at least your friends have some too?”

Harry and Tracey grinned.

“Now, now, Headmaster.” the boy replied. “That would be telling, wouldn’t it?”

The Headmaster took his head in his hands and groaned.

“What is it about?” Tracey asked. “It’s not like they will abuse it and you know it.”

“Let’s just hope that this little fact doesn’t come to the ears of certain people...” he trailed off.

“People who are dead, for the most part.” Harry said with a blank face.

After another pause, a little more uncomfortable than the last, Dumbledore cleared his throat and spoke again.

“Are you ready? I have a portkey to our destination.”

“Good for you.” Harry answered, grinning. “I personally don’t like being held by the navel and swirled around.”

“How are you going to go?” Dumbledore asked.

“We’ll follow you.” Tracey piped in. “Or rather, he will follow you, dragging me along the way.”

“But... how...” The old man closed his eyes and took a deep breath before looking at the two of them again. “Something tells me that it’s not the end of your abilities yet.”

“That particular something... is accurate.” Harry deadpanned.
Three weeks later...

“Nice place.” Hermione said, looking around the apartment.

“Thanks.” Genevieve replied. “I try to keep it that way.”

The Ravenclaw girl sat at the table and unshrunk a folder before opening it and passing the sheets it contained to the young woman. “I have thought about the last designs I gave you and there were some inconsistencies relative to the theory of magic fields. I thought about moving barriers but that isn’t easily done, even with magic. However, with the experience we gained in a recent battle, I can already help you by casting a tube-shaped barrier and a receiving box atop it. A

system of valves would ensure that the collected particles stay at the bottom of the tube.”

Genevieve was browsing the documents, and she frowned.

“What is it?” Hermione enquired.

“I wonder if we can catch some dark matter. How far can you make it?”

“I don’t know... I haven’t tried casting it more than a few meters in the air, so...”

Browsing the documents, the particle scientist made a noncommittal noise in the back of her throat.

“What is that... dark matter?” Hermione asked.

“One of the enigmas of science. It is something we can’t prove is there, but which actual presence would prove our current theories true. Especially the weight of the universe.”

“The... weight? Of the universe?”

“Yes. We know that the universe is much heavier than the cumulative sum of all the stars in it. Even with a few planets around each star, we don’t reach the difference.”

Hermione thought about it for a moment before frowning. “Isn’t it weird that you come up with a theory and try to apply to the world around you?” she asked candidly.

Genevieve looked at her. “What do you mean?”

“Well... I don’t know... don’t you try to find a theory that would be including everything you see? Including the lack of dark matter?”

“It’s just that the theory is so... elegant. Removing the dark matter unknown would make it tremendously more convoluted.”

The two of them fell in a thoughtful silence, before the woman suddenly remembered something Hermione had said. "You spoke about... a battle?"

"It's over. There had been no casualties on our side, and the AA-fields helped restrict the dangerous creatures and destroy them."

The young scientist shuddered, suddenly glad that the muggle world had a distinct separation between civilians and soldiers. Even then, the thought that mere children were fighting hazardous creatures brought worry to her mind. "Did you... kill people?" she asked, before elaborating. "With these barriers, I mean."

"No..." Hermione said, but her gaze was distant for a few minutes. "Although... it could be possible."

"What?" Genevieve asked, scandalized. In her mind, killing dangerous creatures was alright, but doing the same to humans wasn't.

Hermione thought that the Swiss woman was asking for more information and she sat back to explain. "The theory behind Apparation – the usual mean of personal travelling for witches and wizards – states that it's the traveller's magic that determines the pathway taken from their source to their destination." Ignoring Genevieve's baffled look, the girl continued speaking, writing some side notes as she went. "Harry's observation makes me wonder about that pathway: it seems that the Apparating wizards and witches can't change position while travelling. If I were to set an anti-Apparation wall in a shape of a grid, I wonder if the pathway would go through it. They would splinch themselves, perhaps... Yes, surely, even. That would take care of them."

Genevieve gasped, bringing Hermione back to the reality around her.

"Sorry, I got a little carried away, there."

“You... you were seriously planning ways of... killing people?” the woman asked.

The Ravenclaw girl understood that her research topic was a little extreme, and she tried to explain herself. “You see, in the wizarding world, there are people waging war on the society as a whole. You can call them terrorists, if you wish. They use to torture, rape, and murder the families that oppose them. I’d rather have them dead rather than having them kill my family and my friends.”

She paused for a few seconds, gathering her thoughts, before continuing.

“The problem is that these terrorists’ general ideology is shared by many influent people in our society, and little has been done by the official powers to quench their uprising. On top of that, the leader of the people opposing them is the Headmaster of my school, and these terrorists often target it. With Harry’s help, we have learnt how to defend ourselves.”

Genevieve snorted, but Hermione was on a roll.

“Yes, defend. In some activities, and even more in wartime, the best defence is offence.” A pause. “I should tell Harry to explain it to you.”

“Why?”

“He does it better. He taught in our school, you know?”

“He taught?” Genevieve asked, surprised. After a few thoughtful seconds, she added “Your Headmaster must be barmy.”

“You know what?” Hermione asked, her eyes alight with amusement. “That’s exactly how he defines himself.”

And the girl couldn’t hold her laughter at her host’s shocked look.

To be continued in next chapter: Hunting Grounds...

That part was long since promised
And I hope nothing was missed.
Soon, you'll see if our hero
Lowers Voldie to zero.

PART 5 – The End of an Era, the Beginning of Another

This is the last part of this story. It is about Harry Potter's entrance in the wizarding world. As himself. And what happens afterwards.

Chapter 37 – Hunting Grounds

posted June 10th, 2006

The international trip was long and fast, and, upon landing, Dumbledore had to use all the tricks he knew not to fall from the backlash. His personal struggle overcome, he looked around and recognized the large room as the Hall of Universal Business, or HUB. He knew the room belonged to the rather new AGE – comparatively to the millennium-old British Ministry of Magic, the century-old American Government for the Enlightened was quite new – and that it was the arrival destination for all portkeys issued by official governments, the only ones allowed entrance in America in these times of war, actually.

Looking around, Dumbledore noticed something and started to worry. It wasn't the people milling about, nor was it the AGE officials behind their counters or the security officers standing around the room. In fact, it was something that wasn't there. Two someones, in fact: Harry and Tracey hadn't arrived.

His mounting panic abated as suddenly as it had occurred when the two missing teenagers appeared at the same time another couple did. The two teenagers looked around and promptly headed towards him.

"You could have told us that you were going to a warded place." Harry whispered.

The old man smiled genially, his own worry forgotten. "Ah, yes, but where would be the fun in that?" He then frowned. "How did you manage?" he asked in a quiet voice.

"Since the key must have been the portkey itself, we waited for another arrival and hijacked them." Harry replied sotto voce.

Dumbledore's eyes opened as wide as saucers at the revelation that portkeys could be seized while in transit, but he quickly remembered that only Harry was able to do so. The three of them headed for a counter and answered the usual question before being given a leaflet entitled "Manners for Magic-users to Mingle with Mundanes Moderately". After wondering about who would alliterate that much, they studied the text and transfigured their robes into appropriately muggle-looking clothes. Tracey wondered if the instructions were up-to-date, but a date printed on the document showed that it was a recent edition – which meant that, here, at least, the wizards were trying to stay in touch with the world around them.

This done, the old man led the two teenagers to another service of the same building, where Harry and Tracey witnessed Albus Dumbledore playing his politic games with others – something that could help them later.

They left the building soon afterwards, Dumbledore clutching a precious slip of paper in his hands.

“Can you transport us to...” he looked at the paper and finished “Montana?”

Harry looked at the old man with an enquiring gaze. A few years before, he had spent a term in Illinois, and, as a student from the local school, he had had to memorize the States by heart – the rest of the world be damned. As a result, Harry knew what "Montana" was and what it wasn't. He knew it was a State and not a precise address, far from it.

“Is the paper more precise?” he asked, looking at the paper pointedly.

Dumbledore looked nonplussed. “I thought that you'd transport us there and we'd be able to find that park on foot.”

“Which park?”

“Some glacier park... wait, here it is: Glacier National Park.”

Harry stared at the old man for a second, before erupting in peels of laughter, drawing surprised gazes from the passer-bys.

Tracey and Dumbledore looked at each other in confusion.

‘What is so funny? I want a free laugh too.’ the girl sent.

Harry drew a mental map of United States, of the Montana, and added a mental imagery of the sheer size of the aforementioned park. When the two others received it, they chuckled as well.

When they were calmed, Harry addressed Dumbledore. “So... is it more precise than that or not?”

“ The paper says: Montana, Glacier National Park, Blackfoot Reservation.” A pause. “That’s all. But I have been warned: the man is slightly paranoid-”

Harry coughed, a sound that sounded suspiciously like "Moody."

“-and it is possible that his place of residence is heavily warded.” Dumbledore finished, seeming not to have noticed Harry’s interruption – but his eyes told another story.

“Fidelius?” Tracey asked, and the old man nodded.

“Hmmm. An Indian reserve...” Harry mused, trying to remember all he knew about them. Not finding much, he asked around and was pointed to a nearby store where they could buy maps.

A short time later, the three of them exited the place with a detailed map of Montana. Harry grabbed Tracey’s hand, and the girl took Dumbledore’s. Then, following the map in his other hand, Harry Apparated to the edge of the Blackfoot territory.

It was starting to be late in the evening, though, and the excitement of the day pushed them to search a place to sleep first. Thankfully, the reserve was large enough to contain several towns, the largest of

which being Browning. There, they found a quiet hotel and settled for the night.

Meanwhile, in England...

"I want to know who attacked the wards!" Voldemort was angry, but, once again, he was refraining from cursing his followers. They felt the danger, though, and trembled accordingly. "Jugson!"

"Master?"

"You will organize a permanent guard around the house. Four people will always be there. Visibly, your new wards weren't exactly up to task, and it will be your responsibility that they aren't attacked again."

The man bowed low, his head almost touching the floor. "I'm at my Lord's command."

"Unless there's more, you are all dismissed, now." Voldemort said and watched as they readied themselves to leave. They seldom spoke without him asking first, and, despite his obvious invitation, none wanted to be singled out.

Almost.

A woman straightened up. "If I may, my Lord?"

Voldemort frowned at the obviously new recruit. A few seconds later, his memory gave him the woman's name and her job in the outside world: Selina McPherson was assistant to the Head of the Department of Magical Transportation. In the Ministry.

"You have something interesting to add?" he asked, his voice implying that the consequences for uninteresting ideas were dire.

She nodded. "We received a request for an international portkey, master. To the United States. From Dumbledore."

The Dark Lord looked at her, his brow furrowed in thoughts. What was the old man doing there? After a while, he turned to the other Death Eaters – he knew he couldn't ask Ministry employees to leave their jobs for long-term missions.

“Avery!” he called, and his faithful follower approached. Despite his father's demise, the man belonged to the small group of survivors from the Egyptian disaster.

“My Lord?”

“Take Crabbe and Goyle with you and investigate. You are to stay discreet. Avoid international networks of magical transportation like the Floo or portkeys.”

“How are we going to go there, my Lord?” the man asked, rather confused.

“Either fly, Apparate, or take muggle means. Be careful about magical means, though: the American wizards have strengthened their borders.”

Avery wasn't a good flier and wasn't keen on taking the muggle things that flew either, but he knew Apparating to America was way out of his league. With a defeated sigh, he realized that he would have to act muggle for a while, something he abhorred.

“As my Lord wishes.” he said simply.

“Use your secondary wands, too.” Voldemort added. “We wouldn't want an international incident.”

Avery exchanged a brief glance with the two gorilla-like men who were going to accompany him. “We... we don't have them, my Lord.”

The Dark Lord had been pacing, trying to build his plan on the fly, and the man's interruption disturbed him somewhat. “What?”

“They have been lost... in Egypt. My Lord.” he finished, trying to act as obsequiously as possible in order to avoid punishment.

Voldemort huffed. “Go get replacements, then!”

Avery looked at his shoes, obviously having something else to say. “My Lord...”

“What is it? Do you need money to go to Ollivander’s, now?”

“No, my Lord. It’s just... The wand shop is empty.”

“Empty? Good old Ollivander sold all his wands?” the Dark Lord asked, half-amused and half-irritated.

“No, my Lord. It’s more like he left.” A pause. “It was in today’s Daily Prophet, my Lord.”

The last sentence could have avoided Avery a torture session, should he have kept it to himself. After reddening for a few seconds, Voldemort exploded. “DO I LOOK LIKE I READ THAT RAG? CRUCIO!”

After a dozen seconds of excruciating pain – always an eternity for the cursed –, the Dark Lord lifted the Cruciatus and dismissed everybody. Now calmer despite the old wandmaker’s reaction to his threat, he sat and stayed pensive for a long time, wondering about two old men’s whereabouts.

A few minutes later, he called one of his on-site followers. “Jugson!”

“My Lord?” the man replied as he arrived in the room a few seconds later.

“Who do we know in America?”

The man’s analytical mind pondered on the problem for a while before answering. “Among the wizards and witches who dared

opposing you, several succeeded in fleeing before we got to them. Some went there while others went to the Continent.”

A pause.

“That’s quite a number.” Voldemort commented absently.

“Given the rumours around a particular someone, it is also largely possible that he’s there too.” Jugson added, still deep in thoughts.

“Who?”

“Harry Potter, my Lord. There have been some reports that he was posing as a Hogwarts student under the name of Harold Thomson. Whatever the case, Thomson went to Brazil. That’s South America, my Lord.” the man added off-handedly.

“I know where Brazil is!” the Dark Lord exclaimed, before turning pensive. A few seconds later, he spoke again. “Go and tell Avery to make a trip there and to get the brat here.”

When the Death Eater left, Voldemort returned to his thoughtful mood. Despite having succeeded in transforming his ancestral home into an open-sky temple for Wadjet and increasing his ranks, his goddess hadn’t returned his power yet. And he really needed it for the next phase of his plan.
In America, the next morning...

A cup full of tea in front of him, Harry looked at the folded newspaper without seeing it.

“A penny for your thoughts?” a familiar voice asked, and Tracey sat beside him, putting her own tea on the table.

Harry smirked. “Did you get that tea at the bar?”

“Why, yes.” she replied, bringing the cup to her lips. A second later, she was grimacing and Harry was laughing. “What are you laughing

at, mister?" she asked, motioning the cup as though she wanted to throw its content on him.

He raised his arms in defence. "I yield, fair lady. I yield. Besides, I tasted it as well."

"You could have warned me!"

"Children, children." Dumbledore admonished, sitting at the seat in front of them and taking the journal. In front of the two teenagers' expectant gaze, the old man brought the cup to his lips and sipped it serenely.

Several seconds later, he noticed that they were gawking at him. "What is it? Do I have something in my beard?"

"It's... the tea, sir." Tracey said.

"It's pretty good, if I may say so." Dumbledore replied. "Well... I had to tweak it, of course." His eyes were twinkling, now. "I wouldn't trust Americans about that, now would I? They did burn a perfectly good shipment of tea, back when they were known as the Colonies. Only few places sell good tea, now." After a pause, he extended his hand towards their cups. "Let me."

Under their gaze, the mixture swirled and changed into something different. Something tasty. Something they were used to.

"That's Hog-" Tracey started, before closing her mouth as a hotel employee was closing in, his face set in a disapproving frown. 'Dang! He noticed.' she thought.

'He noticed, alright.' Harry sent her. 'But not the tea.'

In fact, the employee was here to scold Dumbledore about something the two teenagers were used to and hadn't noticed until now.

"Sir? Hotel policy forbids customers to enter public places in their pyjama." the man said, causing Harry and Tracey to chuckle.

The Headmaster was clothed in his usual robes.

“Oh, right. I’m sorry.” he said, not sorry at all. Like the two young students, the old man was considering this as highly amusing. The three of them took their improved tea with them and headed to the old man’s room.

It took several tries for Dumbledore to be clad in appropriate clothes, and Harry had to provide mental images to prove the inadequacy of some of the old man’s choices. Albus Dumbledore was not a biker.

Despite having unparalleled mental powers and magic on their side, it appeared that Horace Slughorn was under a Fidelius charm, at the very least: no spell could locate him. The three of them resorted to the usual methods and, after drawing his face from Dumbledore’s memory and Duplicating the paper, they asked around.

When they got no success and realized that it would take them some time, the three of them decided to spend a part of their evenings discussing about something else, and the topic of the school came naturally. Harry’s unusual abilities came forward quickly after that.

“I’m not that powerful.” Harry started, but Tracey’s snort interrupted him. “What? I only have three particular powers: Apparation, Shape-shifting, and Mind Arts-”

“Don’t forget that Mind Arts is Legilimency and Occlumency, and that the first usually needs a wand, not the simple intent you use. It also helped you acquired numerous memories, before sharing them.” the girl pointed out.

Hearing the stressed word, Dumbledore looked at Harry. “Sharing? As in not teaching?”

“Why, yes.” Harry replied. “In the same way I can acquire memories, it seems that I can give them to people as well.”

“That’s interesting. Have you done so for everyone or just your friends?”

“Only my friends.” Harry told his Headmaster. “You have to know that it’s quite taxing, for all parties involved. It would be too much an unusual way of teaching, and it would get to the ears of unsavoury people.”

A pause ensued.

“I always thought you needed a pensieve to do this kind of job, but that item, despite being quite powerful, only works for memories that can actually be gathered as a whole. Skills and abilities are not that easy to gather in our minds.”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know why I can. I always have. I mean... As I said earlier, I have been able to remember what I did as accidental magic and repeat it afterwards.”

“Could you enlighten me?” Dumbledore asked. “Can you show me how you share thoughts?”

Harry nodded, and Tracey Summoned the bottle of aspirin tablets that was never leaving Harry’s possessions.

A couple of hours later, Dumbledore was shaking his head in wonder. “That’s... interesting, to say the least.”

“Thank you as well, Headmaster.” Harry said, contemplating his new memories.

After Harry had shown the old man how he was copying memory slabs, the two of them had agreed to a mutually profitable barter. In exchange for all his memories about Voldemort, the old man received information about how Harry did wandless and silent Apparation and Legilimency. Those two were the strangest of Harry’s powers since, even when copying these memories into Tracey’s mind, she hadn’t succeeded in reaching his level. Harry held the hope that

Dumbledore would be able to pinpoint why it went that way so that the girl would be as safe as possible.
A dozen days later...

The old wizard and the two students were back in Browning with no more information about the elusive Potion Master, even after spending the entire daytime of the last twelve days interrogating people around several towns in the reservation.

On their nights, they had spoken about the search, but also about magic in general, and both teenagers had learnt several aspects of magical means of transportation. Despite the fact that he knew how to Apparate in his own way, Harry didn't know how the widespread theory behind Apparation or portkey making.

Since they had spent almost two weeks working non-stop, and despite their lack of success, the three of them decided that they had earned a rest and spent the afternoon in the local mall.

Just for the fun, Harry and Tracey bought some Weasley-red hair dye, before heading to the local movie theatre with Dumbledore. After discussing for a while, the Headmaster agreed to follow the teenagers to see a brand new animated film: The Lion King.

The following night, Harry dreamed. Despite the fact that he hadn't consumed illicit substance, his dream was quite... special.

He was at the movies again, and was watching Simba meet his insect-eating friends, when a fourth animal appeared in the scene. It wasn't one that belonged there: no badger was starring in this movie.

The animal motioned Harry forward, and the two of them floated to a dusty road in the middle of nowhere. Since he knew it was a dream, Harry didn't find it weird, nor did he find strange the badger's new census uniform – it was a dream, and Harry just knew that.

The badger was counting houses. Farms, in fact. Upon reaching the last and 355th, the house disappeared, leaving the animal perplexed. Finally, it turned to him and told him to investigate.

At breakfast the next day, Harry told Tracey about it and she opened wide eyes mere seconds into the retelling.

“I had the same dream.” she said, interrupting him.

The two of them looked at each other for a while, mentally comparing their dreams and reaching the conclusion that they had exactly the same dream.

Suddenly, they sensed someone sitting at their table, and jumped when they noticed that it wasn't Dumbledore.

“Enjoying your visit, kids?”

It was an old man, for sure. But it wasn't their Headmaster. Sitting in front of them, the face tanned by outdoors activities, sat an old Native American.

“What... what can we do for you?” Harry asked.

“I overheard you speaking about animals in your dreams.” the man said, and Harry silently vowed to be more careful in the future. “I also know that you travelled the town in search of a man. If it can help your quest, know that dreams are tools for the Spirits to guide us. Whatever the animals said, follow their advice.”

And, leaving the two teenagers quite stunned, the man simply stood and left. When Dumbledore came down – this time in proper Muggle attire –, he found their gobsmacked expressions particularly amusing and told them so.

It took them a couple hours to interpret their dream correctly and they quickly found the local office of the census bureau to "investigate". With that particular task, their unusual abilities helped greatly, ensuring that the employees wouldn't find their request strange, and that they would promptly forget about them afterwards.

Unfortunately, in their glee of obtaining the list of the 355 farms, they forgot to remove the memory of their request from the census employees' minds, and that would lead to unfortunate consequences later.

Six hours later...

"I'm tired." Tracey said.

"Me too." Harry replied.

"I have to say, I'm exhausted as well." Dumbledore finished.

The three of them had spent a long time going through the list of farms. Since it was a part of the census information that hadn't thought to ask, the list didn't contain information about the number of occupants or their activities, only their address. And they were quite tired to find beef cattle everywhere they went.

His magic intact despite his physical fatigue, the Headmaster Conjured seats for them to rest their limbs, as well as a light meal. It was only an hour later that they were able to continue the list.

And they found the missing farm quite easily – or rather, the lack thereof. And, no, it wasn't the last in the list: they had checked that one first. Since they knew for a fact that something was there, they could focus on that idea and sense the magic fields there.

They called for the man but nobody answered – and they felt a little stupid to call for someone in a barren area. Not losing hope, Harry decided to visit the nearby town to see if he could get additional information on the man. Tracey agreed and went to follow him, but Dumbledore stated that he had a better chance at meeting Slughorn if he waited outside his protected property.

Wishing each other good luck, they parted ways.

Harry and Tracey approached the rural town and started to interrogate people. Despite the fact that the sun was starting to set, there were many people around, and Harry finally got a lead... to

someone else. Apparently, the last times the Potion Master had been seen, he was always accompanied with a very tall and muscular black man.

Getting the picture of the man from the memory of the passer-by he was talking to, Harry was so shocked that Tracey felt it from the other side of the street.

‘What is it?’ she sent.

‘I have a lead.’

‘So?’

‘It’s a man.’

‘And?’

‘It’s the spitting image of Dean. Dean Thomas.’

A pause.

‘So what?’ she sent. ‘It may be a relative of him.’

‘When we were introduced in first year, he said he was muggleborn.’

‘Well... just to cover all angles... the man might not be magical.’

‘And be friendly with Slughorn? I’m not sure.’

‘We’ll see when we’ll meet him.’ she answered with finality. ‘Where is he?’

Harry looked around, but the old woman he had been talking to had left. Noticing that she was still nearby, he entered her mind again and found out – from her memory of reading the local newspaper – that

the man had been arrested by the local sheriff and was in prison. For dealing drugs.

“It doesn’t fit.” he told Tracey, who had walked up to him. “How comes a drug dealer mixes with a Potion Master?”

“Slughorn was perhaps making money by fabricating drugs?” Tracey proposed. “Come on.” she added, pulling at his arm. “We’ll never know if we stay here, and the police station is this way.”

They entered a small building where a lone sheriff was listening to the radio and smoking a cigarillo, his eyes on the ceiling. When they entered, he merely threw them a glance and exhaled another blue cloud in the already smoky office.

“Whaddaya want?” he called, showing his yellow teeth in a grimace that wasn’t really a greeting.

“Pardon us, good sir.” Harry enunciated, using his best British accent. “We are on a school trip, and we would like to ask you about the duties of a remarkable sheriff such as you are.”

Tracey tried not to laugh as the man’s mixed emotions showed on his face: annoyance at being disturbed by kids warred with pleasure at being described as remarkable and... irritation about the kids’ origin?

Tracey sent a short mental message to Harry, who nodded, and she escaped. Despite being free of the smoke in the office, she didn’t want to laugh anymore. Her Legilimency ability – not reaching Harry’s but still better than their friends’ – had intercepted thoughts from the man. Dirty thoughts. Thoughts of xenophobia and sexism. And she really needed to “clean” her mind. And lungs.

Meanwhile, Harry was “interviewing” the man. His body would clean the smoke easily, and his mind was strong enough to stomach the man’s dirtiness. Harry quickly realized that the drug dealing motive he had used to imprison the black man had been a pretext. The sheriff had simply not wanted a black man in “his” village. Angered by the

man's attitude, Harry grafted a Guilt core in his mind before asking to see the prisoner.

Unfortunately, the man wasn't there anymore. Following the rules for drug dealing in the area, he had been shipped to the nearest federal prison: the Federal Detention Centre "SeaTac", near Seattle. After obtaining the prisoner's name from the sheriff's mind, Harry confiscated the few belongings that the sheriff had seized for himself and not sold or used yet – including a foot-long cedar wand.

By now, it was quite late. The two teenagers left the town proper to find Dumbledore, and the three of them discussed their options. Knowing that parts of their search would be difficult, the Headmaster had prepared a stash of potions, and he offered to share a vial of Pepper-Up potion so that they could function at one hundred percent for a few more hours.

The three of them Apparated to Seattle and sought a hotel to settle in. At the same time, in Browning, Montana...

The census office was supposedly closed for the night, but four persons were still there. Three were wielding wands and sneers and the fourth was on the floor, writhing and screaming in pain. It didn't pass the Silencing dome around them, though.

Avery lifted the Cruciatus and approached the bald man. "I am sure you see who I'm talking about, now. Besides, people told us that they entered here. What did they want?"

The Muggle didn't remember who his torturers were talking about – hence the previous torture session. But he had an idea about that particular question. Trembling so much that even speaking was difficult, he barely spoke coherently enough for the three Death Eaters to understand that it was about a list.

"What list? What did they want to do with it? Answer me, filthy Muggle!" Avery exclaimed, kicking the man's kidneys while his two goons smiled stupidly.

The man didn't know why they called him Muggle, but he supposed that his life depended on his answers. "They... searched... farm... empty."

"Give us the address!" Avery shouted and the man recoiled in fright.

The wizards advanced menacingly and he cried. "I will! Please!"

He went to a computer and typed several SQL requests, the results of which he printed out. The wizards were impressed about the thing and surprised when the printer started to hum – Goyle almost cursed it – but none of them would admit something like that to the others, or even to themselves. The sheet in his hand, Avery smiled sardonically, before applying his own memory charm on the man. A definitive one, which nobody could counter.

"Avada Kedavra!"

Meanwhile, 435 miles to the west...

Harry Apparated to the prison, and, hidden in the gaseous reality, he inconspicuously took some data from the guards' minds.

And he swore.

Apparently, the man had moved again, but the guards didn't have the slight idea where he went, for the simple reason that the secret services agents who had taken him hadn't told them. Searching deeper in the guards' memories, Harry found out that this particular prison was quite modern, and that DNA charts were made for each and every new inmate. And it was soon after submitting the chart of Robert Thomas that the "men in black" had shown themselves.

Harry swore again.

If the CIA had means to identify magic ability from DNA charts, all his and Powell's job at maintaining the Secrecy would inevitably fail.

Harry sent a burst of words to Tracey to inform her about the situation before heading to the opposite coast. He knew where he was going: he had been there already.

In the Headquarters for the CIA, there were always people milling about, working on top-secret projects and whatnot. Once there, Harry quickly found the one with the highest clearance and took control of her body – it was a woman – before making her log on her computer.

Looking at the screen through her eyes, Harry was quite shocked. It appeared that the Muggle secret service had been quite inquisitive in their operations, and numerous magical individuals had been screened already. All of them were held in some rural zone that held the number 51, under heavy watch and sedation.

After a brief pause to consider his actions and their repercussions – trying to raise the minimum wave, that is – Harry made her destroy all the evidence of the CIA ever finding about the wizarding world. He followed his action by taking control of a computer technician and making him "inadvertently" demagnetize the appropriate backup tapes. He took control of everybody who had the slightest power on the Plan of Identifying Genetically Magical Individuals and Extract their Secrets – codename PIGMIES – and made them act against it. Genetic data and samples were destroyed. Memories were removed. Printouts were shredded. Automatic orders for prisons to send DNA charts were rescinded. Having the address of the most influential persons in the program from the first files he had witnessed, he even visited them and updated their memories in their sleep.

He was past picky scruples. It was about survival. If the files were right, the secret agency wanted to put all wizards and witches in America under its thumb. And the pictures from Area 51 weren't good-looking. If they had been in black and white, Harry would have thought of World War II.

It was past midnight already, but he knew he had to act fast. He knew that there were only two sites concerned about this: the Headquarters and the infamous Area. Knowing that it would be faster than any other mean of transportation, he Apparated to Seattle himself and fetched Dumbledore and Tracey before heading to the south.

Once hidden in the gaseous reality of the Area, he took control of the guards' minds one after the other, erasing memories and planting the order to leave the place at three o'clock. He had quickly finished doing all the guards and was short-circuiting the cameras and computers when the time arrived and the Muggles left. Harry finished his job with the surveillance devices before Apparating in with his two friends.

...in front of a nightmarish vision.

There, men, women, and children were parked like in... some historical example of managing unwanted population. Due to the sedatives, many of them had lost a large part of their muscle mass.

"These... I can't even find an expletive strong enough... they did that to magical people? They target us?" Dumbledore asked.

"Apparently." Harry replied sombrely. "I made sure to remove all tracks they had about this, though."

"How can we help them all?" Tracey enquired. "They are like... hundreds in here."

"247." Harry supplied.

Dumbledore was silent, scratching his beard pensively. Despite his thoughts about wars and such, he knew that, being vastly outnumbered, the magical population couldn't win the fight should the Muggles discover and hunt them. It was thankful that Harry had stopped the mechanism before it went too far – he had dark thoughts about Hogwarts being targeted by those "flying fortresses".

Thinking about Hogwarts brought a smile to his lips, though, and he turned to Harry. "Can you fetch Madam Pomfrey here?"

"Yes. Although I could do with another Pepper-Up."

Dumbledore complied and gave Harry a list of potions that could be helpful. Harry left soon afterwards, after a deep kiss to Tracey and a reassurance that everything would be fine. During these events...

“Nobody around?” the man asked.

“No.” his bodyguards answered.

“Lumos.”

Avery looked at the small device his master had given him. It came with a booklet written by Jugson – who had judiciously noted that the original Muggle instructions weren’t easy for the standard pure-blooded wizard to understand.

He restored the weapon turret to its original size and oriented it towards the missing place. After the conscientious application of a Silencing charm around it – Jugson’s idea again: better not to drag Muggles more than necessary – they activated it and watched, mesmerized, as the charm fell slowly, in time with the house.

Between their arrival and the Fidelius’ collapse, it still took an hour, and the robotized weapon was red-hot. After stopping it, cooling it magically, and shrinking it again, the three dark wizards went to inspect the ruin. Only unsteady ruins remained from the structure, and there were no blood stains at all – meaning that the house had been empty or emptied while they were firing on it.

Avery was still inspecting the house when he noticed something of interest: in the remains of a study, several papers were floating in the night breeze. Some of them with stamps. And, on one of them, there was an address:

H. Slughorn
666 Cemetery Road
Glenwood Springs CO 81601

“Got it!” Avery crowed, and the three of them left the place. After much intimidation inflicted on nearby families, they got the meaning of "CO 81601" and headed to the south.

At the same moment, in Nevada...

To say that Madam Pomfrey was sadly impressed by the number of patients and their state would be a gross understatement. Under the conditions, she accepted to use Duplicated potions instead of the normal ones: she had only few of these anyways. Thankfully, Harry had experience casting Duplication Charms and the potions were of good quality – having been made by Flamel during the school year.

While Harry had been travelling and collecting Madam Pomfrey, Dumbledore and Tracey had sorted the patients and had found Mr Thomas. They had used the Headmaster's own potions to bring him back among the living, and the man had told them the address of the Potion Master. The two of them were close friends, to the point of being each other's Secret Keeper.

When Harry arrived, Robert repeated the address for him to find it, and Harry took the physical location from the man's mind before disappearing.

While he was gone, Dumbledore and Pomfrey were treating the patients as quickly as possible, assisted by Tracey and Mr Thomas. They stayed on their guard, though: several of them had been taken from federal prisons, after all, and only the old man's "all-clear" signal after a bout of Legilimency made Madam Pomfrey use anti-sedative potions on the patient.

666 Cemetery Road, Glenwood Springs, Colorado...

Harry arrived to the edge of an anti-Apparation field.

He supposed that it was the job of a particular paranoid Potion Master and Apparated in.

He then noticed a couple of things.

First, he was seeing the house, which was a good sign, since it meant that the Secret Keeper had given him the appropriate information.

Second, the house was in flames, and it was not a good sign.

Third, a cursory scan of the house showed that there was someone in there. Someone unconscious, and, therefore, probably dying.

Harry ran to the house to fetch the poor man – certainly the sought-after Potion Master – when he heard an incantation shouted behind him and ropes tied his arms and legs to his body. As, propelled by his momentum, his body tumbled across the doorway, he mentally swore at his lack of forethought.

It was intriguing, at the same time: wasn't Robert Thomas Slughorn's Secret Keeper? Was it him who sent an arsonist against his friend?

He had no time to ponder on this, though, as he was now distinctly seeing Slughorn's prone body next to him, blood leaking on the carpeted floor – and flames around them. As he was crawling to the man, he evaluated his options.

He couldn't Apparate because of the anti-Apparation ward – well, he could, but Slughorn would bleed to death if he waited for the fire to subside or for the anti-Apparation field to drop.

He could break his bounds thanks to the fire. After strengthening his skin, he did just that.

The smoke was debilitating. He wasn't seeing his assailant, and nothing proved that said assailant was alone. He could Levitate, but staying atop a blazing inferno wouldn't be good either – levitation wasn't allowing directional movement. Wings, on the other side, would allow him that movement, but had the drawback of being extremely flammable.

His eyes lit up, suddenly realizing that he could do both.

Acting quickly because of the fire around them, he grabbed the Potion Master and hauled him through a gap in the ceiling. Then, using an ability he had trained many times before the school year ended, he extended his wings.

Thankfully, the three Death Eaters had been monitoring the doors, and almost no one had witnessed him escaping the flaming house. Just one person.

A couple miles away, Eddie Mad Wolf had been drowning his girlfriend-related sorrow in firewater, and had just noticed the flames from the burning house. Fetching his binoculars, he had the surprise of seeing something he took for a very large bird shoot out of a burning house and cast lightning around the place.

Eddie's background made him fall to his knees in awed recognition. "Wakinyan." he breathed, using the Lakota Sioux name of the mythological Thunderbird. "I promise... I won't drink anymore."

And, after throwing his bottle in the nearby bushes, Eddie climbed on his unsteady legs and left this story forever.

Harry wasn't casting lighting around, though – not exactly, that is. Remarking that the Death Eaters hadn't noticed him, and wanting to interrogate them, he had Summoned his staff and had promptly Stunned them. Grabbing everyone, he Apparated back to Nevada and the Area 51.

Tracey lunged at him, and, noticing his singed state, she gasped.

Pomfrey lunged at Slughorn, and, noticing his wounds, she gasped.

Dumbledore lunged at the Death Eaters, and, noticing their identity, he gasped.

Mr Thomas didn't need to move to gasp: Harry's wings were impressive by themselves.

It took a long time to stabilize Slughorn and treat the remaining unsteady patients from the room. Harry made sure that even the ones who had been falsely imprisoned before were innocent – or that it

was only a minor offence: lack of respect to a Muggle police officer is laughable, but only if the wizard doesn't lose his wand in the process. The very few who were criminals, he instilled a core of Guilt again and let them free.

In the Area was a room with all their belongings, and Harry helped to return them to their owners as well, his inherent Legilimency allowing him to discern whether a claim was genuine or not, thus preventing the slightest theft. The stranded wizards and witches, upon recovering their wands and after thanking their rescuers, Apparated back to their homes. The families waited for all of their members to be equally furnished before leaving together.

When the sun started to rise, Harry had downed a fourth Pepper-Up potion, emptying Dumbledore's stash, and there weren't many people remaining. Only thirty-odd adults and a dozen children. Some of them were squibs, and the others simply didn't know how to Apparate or hadn't had their wand when they had been arrested.

Harry told everyone to hold hands and Apparated the group to the successive hometowns of its members, one after the other.

Once back in their hotel room in Browning, Harry fell on the bed, asleep before hitting the pillow. He hadn't even retracted his wings. On the steep hills outside Glenwood Springs...

The house had long since collapsed, and the fire was now licking at the surrounding vegetation. Over the course of a few days, it would continue to grow and evolve into a dangerous wildfire – aided at some point by some alcohol bottle carelessly thrown in the desiccated undergrowth.

When the fire department would finally take notice of it, the fire would have developed so much and so quickly that it had become uncontrollable. On July 6th, fourteen fire-fighters would die in their heroic struggle against it.

Once again, the news wouldn't reach the ears of those responsible for the initial fire.

That afternoon...

Since he had been dosed in Pepper-Up potions several times, Harry didn't need that many hours of sleep, and he awoke just as the afternoon was drawing to a close, scratching his head in confusion.

He had dreamed about animals again.

This time, the vivid scene contained two pigs sleeping peacefully. Suddenly, one disappeared. A mere second later, the second one woke suddenly before running around in panic. Harry had thought it funny until he had noticed that the panic wasn't due to the first's disappearance. The second pig was growing. Inflating, even. Just before it exploded, Harry noticed a huge snake far from the pigsty, a lit wand in its mouth and a pink shape resembling another pig at its feet... figuratively. Once again, a badger had appeared and told him something: "It's his magic."

After unsuccessfully trying to understand what it was about, he decided to let the matter drop for the moment. Looking around, he noticed that someone, probably Dumbledore, had enlarged the room and Conjured a row of beds for everybody. Tracey had the one next to his bed – she hadn't dared sleeping near his wings, in fear of breaking them. Dumbledore was next, followed by Pomfrey, Slughorn, Thomas, and the three Death Eaters – Stunned and bound to the bunks they had been given.

As he was staring at the three dark wizards, absent-mindedly shrinking his wings at the same time, he suddenly heard a distinct and ominous noise.

His stomach rumbled.

Leaving his friends, he left the room quietly to see if the restaurant downstairs had some take-away food. Apparently, they didn't.

He was in line at the fast-food next door when he heard someone calling for him. He absently glanced in the caller's direction and found that it was the old Blackfoot native again. And the man was gesturing at him to come and sit.

“So,” the man said as only preamble, “was your dream informative enough?”

“It was.” Harry replied. “Can you explain, now? Who are you, by the way?”

“I’m Wapasha Kaneonuskatew, wakan of my people. Or shaman, or medicine-man, if you must call me that.”

“I’m Harry Potter. Nice to meet you.” Harry replied. For some reason, he felt compelled to show respect to the old man.

The self-described shaman nodded and continued his story. “We Blackfeet have several myths in our religion, and we share a few of them with the other tribes of the Great Plains. One of them involves an animal spirit guiding us through dreams.”

“Again!?” Harry exclaimed. Seeing the man’s disgruntled look, he tried to explain and apologize. “Sorry. It’s just that I have already met an animal-shaped guardian... spirit, of sorts, and I thought... Sorry again, please continue.”

At that moment, though, the man was staring at him. “What kind of animal is it?”

Harry looked around but no one was interested in their conversation. “A feathered snake.” He paused when Wapasha jumped in surprise, but the man stayed silent, so he carried on. “And, in my most recent dreams, it was a badger.”

It took a few seconds for the shaman to collect his wits. “Understandable. Badgers are fairly common around here, and it is one of our favourite totem animals.”

“Speaking of which, I’m always interested to learn all kinds of... cultural aspects of countries I visit and people I meet. What can you tell me about totems?”

“Well... let’s just say that they regroup the animal spirits of a clan. Most people have one... had one, in fact: the young generation has forgotten how to let themselves merged with the Great Spirit, and there are less and less guardian spirits in the tribes. Nowadays, totem poles are erected for artistic value!” the man exclaimed with a shudder, before taking a long swallow from his beer. “They think these poles are describing a tribes’ history... and they aren’t entirely false. Initially, a single animal spirit was enough to guard a whole tribe. When tribesmen started to marry women from other tribes, the spirits mingled as well. At first, it was two or three, but it quickly reached a dozen animals. Since it was a sign of spiritual power to have a tall totem, greater and greater trees began to be felled to build the highest possible ones. Competition stopped short, though.”

“Why?” Harry asked.

“ Some spirits thought this to be conceited and frivolous, and departed the tribes. The great Thunderbird, for instance, may be shown on today’s totems, but the spirit had left a long time ago.”

“What is a Thunderbird?”

“It was a large bird, with huge wings.” the man answered absently. “They were so large that, when they flapped, clouds congregated underneath and a thunderstorm erupted.” A pause. “Another spirit stayed with the tribes for a very long time, before being forced out, too.”

“Forced out? I don’t understand.”

“The bison, it was. Many of our ancestors were warned about the fact that white-faced people would invade our hunting grounds, but the tribes continued to squabble about inconsequential things instead of uniting as a nation. It wasn’t because we didn’t have firearms that we had to be deprived of our whole way of life!”

The man’s last exclamation had drawn uneasy glances from some customers nearby, as well as glares from others. One of them, a tall and strong – and potbellied – white man with a NASCAR cap, stood

up and approached the man from behind. Harry saw the lumberjack's approach and thunderous expression and his peripheral Legilimency caught his intentions easily. His motives were a little trouble, but it didn't really matter. Harry didn't want a fight to erupt and, in the man's mind, he planted the suggestion that he'd continue on his way, head outside, and kick something to calm himself. Something hard, preferably.

The would-be intruder gone, they continue to discuss Native American traditions, and Harry learnt more about spirits, dance rituals, and shape-shifters.

He completely forgot his friends.
Meanwhile...

Avery was in trouble. He had awoken in a slightly darkened room, and had tried to jump to his feet, only to find solid and magical bounds holding him down. That's when he also noticed the bodies sleeping around him, and Crabbe and Goyle's tied shapes as well. Patting himself where he could, he noticed that he had been deprived of his wand and his other magical artefacts.

After tentatively feeling his mouth with his tongue, his face broke in a wide smile: they hadn't checked his teeth! Apparently, the fact that his master had links with those strange Muggles had brought fruit. All important Death Eaters had been fitted with new dental services, the most useful being the safeguard portkey. There was poison, too, either to spit on eventual captors or evade interrogation. Permanently.

"Crabbe!" Avery whispered intently. "Goyle!"

He heard the grunts of someone awakening, but, to his dismay, it wasn't his friends. It was Dumbledore. Not wanting to be Stunned again, Avery sneered at the old man's scrunched face and slammed his mouth shut. Hard.

Since the three dark wizards had been subdued and dispossessed of their items, no ward had been raised against portkeys, and, as predicted, Avery reappeared in Wadjet's temple, in Little Hangleton.

The night had already fallen there, and only Voldemort was there, mulling on some dark plan or another.

The ropes hadn't followed Avery, and the man went to his knees to salute his master. "Master..." he started unsteadily. "We have succeeded in our mission, but were taken by Dumbledore. They took everything I had but didn't check my teeth for portkeys, and I escaped as soon as I could. I don't know about the others, though. They were still unconscious when I left, and-"

"Avery!" Voldemort called.

Trembling, the man tentatively answered. "Yes, my Lord?"

"You're rambling."

The man raised his hand so fast that his neck made an ominous noise. He winced, but that didn't change the surprise in his eyes. The Dark Lord's was... smiling?

"You see, Avery, I have conducted research on the Dark Mark. Well... I had Jugson do that, really. And I have incorporated a few charms in your marks. Since it was my magic all along, it was quite easy. And nobody but me can remove them. Nifty, no?"

"Yes, my Lord." Avery automatically answered, before asking "What kind of charms?"

"That is for me to know, Avery, and you not to find out until it is needed that you know."

"Yes, my Lord." the man, humbled, bowed even lower.

"Now, Avery, I want you to look at me. Look me in the eyes. Remember what happened. Legilimens."

It took some time for Voldemort to sift through the unordered mind of his follower. He was quite glad that the target had been burned in his house, especially given who it was. However, he was so surprised at

a particular memory that he rewound it a few times. Apparently, Avery had seen a man sleeping between him and Dumbledore – because of his lying position, he hadn't seen the others – and the man's identity was the surprise.

Getting out of Avery's mind, the Dark Lord was thinking to himself. 'Well, well, well... it seems that Robert Thomas didn't die like he was supposed to. Did Bellatrix lie to me?' A pause. 'I won't know, now. But it doesn't matter. Now, what is the most interesting? Getting two followers back with the portkey in their arm? Or make them explode and get rid of Dumbledore and Thomas? Perhaps I can compromise...'

Not even throwing a look at Avery's crumpled form – the Dark Lord's Legilimency wasn't kind and considerate for one's health – Voldemort headed to his private study. There, on one of the tables, was an opened a box where thirty-odd small orbs of reinforced crystal rested. In each of them was a drop of blood from one particular follower, and three balls were out already. He returned Avery's orb to the box and aimed his wand at the two others, before stopping.

It was a difficult choice, really. Crabbe or Goyle? Neither was more interesting than the other, or more powerful, knowledgeable, or particularly skilful. They were good bodyguards, though.

Making his mind up, he decided to keep Goyle. After all, Crabbe went always first. It was always "Crabbe and Goyle", in that order. Crabbe would go first.

He spoke the required words, his wand touching the orb linking him to the Dark Mark on Goyle's arm, and the man appeared a minute later. He was still sleeping, snoring solidly, and Voldemort scowled before kicking him in the ribs.

"Huh? Wha?" the man sure wasn't a light sleeper. Perhaps that's why he wasn't in the front lines in the fight in Egypt. Perhaps that's why he survived. "My Lord!" he finally exclaimed, his three neurons now activated.

“Leave.” Voldemort said, pointing at the appropriate door – he didn’t want the lumberjack to... lumber... through his ordered study. Once alone, he pointed his wand at Crabbe’s orb and spoke a particular set of words. With a smile, he noticed the magic in the blood drop flare before it went completely inert.

The orb now useless, he threw it in a pit he had designed to absorb all failed and possibly explosive experiments. It deactivated the magic in everything thrown in it before disintegrating them.

He then left the room and proceeded to give Avery his next mission: to return to America and get information to see if anyone escaped the explosion. He knew Dumbledore was powerful, but doubted that anything could have escaped the mass-to-energy explosion having just taken place.

Given what had actually happened, he should have kept Crabbe’s sphere.

Just a bit earlier...

Dumbledore was fully awake, now, and was magically awakening his companions. “We may have a problem.” he told them. “Avery just disappeared.”

“How is it possible?” Tracey asked. “We removed everything magical they had on themselves.”

“I don’t know.” the old man said, before looking around. “Where is Harry?”

“I’ll see.” she said, and left the room – it was more to be alone when grasping her pendant than actually fetching him.

Meanwhile, the four adults tried to understand what had happened, and Madam Pomfrey was the one with the right question. “Since it can’t be an item, perhaps they have a charm on themselves, or something. I’ll check.”

She went to Crabbe and started a series of diagnostic spells. Medical diagnostics picked several things, and she immediately noticed that something was wrong in the man's mouth, and on his Dark Mark. She had treated Snape enough times, when he seemed to be Light-aligned, to know what the mark felt like under her diagnostic spells.

"Albus... this isn't good."

"What isn't good?" a voice asked from the doorway. Harry had heard Tracey's call and, after thanking the shaman for the discussion, he had hurried there.

"They have a charm in their mouth, I don't know what is it exactly but it isn't a Stay-Fresh charm-"

Tracey snorted. "That much is obvious."

Pomfrey smiled before continuing her explanation. "The Dark Mark seems to have been modified in some way, too. Enhanced, I would say. The tangle of spells around it is larger than what it was when... before."

"Is it dangerous?" Dumbledore asked.

"I can't say, but I know that You-Know-Who has made his mark to bring pain to his followers. It was already-"

"For us, I mean." the old Headmaster corrected himself.

A pause ensued, and Pomfrey launched into another string of diagnostic spells on the arm. "I feel destructive magic, yes."

"Hmmm... What kind?" Dumbledore asked. "It's just so that we can cast a shield around him or something."

"I don't really understand." the medi-witch whispered. "It's too advanced... and disgustingly evil, on top of being powerful."

During the discussion, Harry as returned to their room, his mind still on the native's words. When Pomfrey had started her examination of their captives, he had entered the witch's outer mind ss discreetly as possible, and he had witnessed her observations, comparing with what he knew. Like herself, though, he was stumped by the strange construct. Back in his own mind, he tried to understand the magic patterns he had seen. He was sure that the Mark was now a receptacle for several spells, but it hadn't been possible to identify these.

While he was pondering about this, looking at the two large men with thoughts of Voldemort in a distance, a memory was tugging at his mind. He closed his eyes briefly, wanting to remember what was so important. His eyes opened suddenly, though, and he looked at the two pig-like men in front of him.

"He's going to explode!" he blurted out, interrupting Dumbledore and Pomfrey's discussion about shields.

"What?" asked Madam Pomfrey. "What do you mean?"

"We don't have time!" he argued. "How can we... Can we remove their magic?"

It was Dumbledore's turn to be perplex. "Why do you want to remove their magic?"

"Believe me! Can we, or can we not, remove their magic? Even temporarily?"

Dumbledore frowned, and Harry could almost see mental wheels turning. To his surprise, the old man wasn't only thinking about how he could do it. He was also reflecting about whether someone else could be better than him to do it. Harry recognized then an important difference between Dumbledore and him: the old man knew how to delegate jobs.

And he did, right now, as he turned to Slughorn. "Horace?"

“What do you want, Albus?” the man asked.

“Can you do it? I recall you did something like that before.”

The man frowned. “I... suppose.” He paused for a few seconds before turning to Madam Pomfrey. “Do you have some Calming Draught, Poppy?” he asked the hospital matron. “And some copper and sodium hypochlorite, as well?”

“Bleach?” Tracey piped in, drawing everyone’s gaze. “Why would you want bleach?”

“Young woman, I ask no question, you ask no question. You know where to find some?”

“Err... well... perhaps.” she answered. After all, they were in a hotel, and bleach was surely available somewhere. Harry had caught up, though, and, being faster and more inconspicuous since he could inspect minds and snatch objects from the gaseous reality, he disappeared.

When he came back with the bottle of detergent, Slughorn was still asking several other potions and ingredients from Madam Pomfrey, emptying them into a cauldron Dumbledore had conjured. With a fire underneath it, the cauldron’s strange mixture was bubbling already.

“Copper, anyone?” Slughorn asked, before remembering something. He fished a dime out of his own pockets and, after a focused Vanishing spell to get rid of the nickel, he dropped the coin in the cauldron. “Done! But we need to awaken them for it to work.”

“Are you sure about this, Harry?” Dumbledore asked, looking at the mixture. ‘Personally, I don’t know anything remotely similar to this potion, and Horace seems a bit different from the last time I saw him. Wilder.’

‘That’s America for you.’ Harry mentally replied with a smirk. ‘I picked his thoughts at different moments. He seems fine to me.’

Noticing Thomas' raised wand, his voice returned and he exclaimed "Wait!"

"What?" the black man asked. "Horace said we ought to wake them."

"I know. We just have to wait. I guess."

"You guess? You guess?" the Potion Master asked indignantly. "Who do you think you-"

At that precise moment, something happened, interrupting Slughorn.

Goyle disappeared.

Harry immediately woke Crabbe magically before pushing the portly Potion Master towards him. "NOW!" he exclaimed, before entering Crabbe's mind and making sure the man was compliant.

Slughorn was too surprised to resist again and he fed the man a cup of the potion.

Crabbe shuddered and dropped backwards, unconscious again.

"There. Gone for an hour." Slughorn commented before rounding on Harry. "Now, I want an explanation."

"It's Voldemort." Harry said, and he noticed the wince in the Pomfrey's expression. He rolled his eyes mentally and spoke to her. "I'll call him Riddle if you prefer."

"Riddle?" she asked, perplexed. Two others looked at him intently, although he didn't perceive the same kind of surprise from them: Slughorn's mind was pondering shrewdly, while Thomas' was full of anger – not at him, at Riddle/Voldemort.

"We'll see later how you can possibly know the Dark Lord's identity." Slughorn said pompously, throwing a meaningful glance at Dumbledore – who answered by a genuine smile. "Who might the two

of you be?" he then asked Harry and Tracey. "You are just students... Hogwarts, I presume, since Albus and Poppy are here. And... what the hell happened in the last 24 hours?"

"You might want to sit for this, Horace." Dumbledore said warmly.

"Nonsense! I'm better standing." the man replied, looking at Harry and Tracey intently.

The two of them were looking at each other and nodded at seemingly random times. Horace Slughorn frowned. Were those two playing an act, or were they genuinely... discussing somehow?

"Well?" he enquired, noticing that he had really interrupted something.

The two of them turned to him and, while Harry was looking at the Potion Master fixedly, Tracey answered. "I'm Tracey Davis, third year Slytherin in Hogwarts. And this is my boyfriend..." She turned to Harry. "Is he ready yet?"

"Just a second." the boy replied. After a slightly longer pause than that, he smiled at the man. "What is my name?"

The man huffed automatically. "What are you speaking about? How could I know that you're named Harry Potter if you don't... introduce... yourself." The two words were drawn out and the man's eyes widened. "Potter? The Harry Potter?"

The addressed boy smiled sheepishly. "For all I know, there might be other Harry Potter around the world, and my undue fame prevents them from rising. I'm really sorry for them."

Tracey snorted. "Undue fame!"

"Why, that's true!" he replied. "What am I known for? Defeating a Dark Lord? Firstly, he was not, and still is not, defeated. Yet. Secondly, I was fifteen months old, for Merlin's sake! And my parents

died. I'm perhaps known for that, but I am not a glory hound and I certainly don't want the fame."

"We know, we know." Dumbledore interrupted gently. "If you were, you would have entered Hogwarts under your real name from the first year."

Harry grunted. "What a joy that would have been! With Voldemort there and whatnot, I wouldn't have lasted a week."

The two of them knew they were digressing from the original subject and they turned to the Potion Master... only to find him on the floor, barely held in a sitting position by his friend Robert.

"We did advise you to sit down, Horace." Dumbledore said amusedly. He then turned to Harry. "You gave him everything?"

"Just the bare bones. I have one more vault to make, though." the teenager replied, before looking towards Mr Thomas.

"What is happening here?" the black man asked, before hanging his head. "I realize I haven't thanked you all for your help... So... thank you. Now, what's happening? And why is Horace so shocked to see a boy named Harry Potter, who, incidentally, is currently not a student at Hogwarts, actually?" A pause. "And how do I even know this?"

"Calming Draught, Poppy?" Dumbledore asked. The medi-witch didn't move, and Harry groaned.

"Alright, a third vault for today. Keep in mind that we have our dear fellow to treat afterwards." he said, pointing his thumb at the unconscious body of Mr Crabbe behind him.

When the hospital matron was updated on his identity and fitted with the appropriate mental safe, Harry, Tracey, and Dumbledore launched into a retelling of their trip. As they summed things, they were able to finish under the hour, and everyone went to check the prone Death Eater.

Harry tried to find the place in the man's mind where the Mark was active, but found none. He knew it had been a possibility, though, since the Mark was controlled by Voldemort. And there was nothing the Death Eater could do to prevent it, hence the lack of presence of the infamous Mark in the man's mind.

Being in a mental landscape, he took some time to inspect what was there – in case Voldemort had let slip something in his follower's presence. Nothing came up, but Harry confirmed the lack of intelligence of the fellow whose mind he was browsing. Thinking about his current problems, Harry decided that, since the man basically owed them his life, he had the right to do something about his mind.

He thus went digging under the man's consciousness building to create a vault there. But it wasn't to store his identity. It was to store directions.

Basically, Harry made Crabbe overlook and forget the fact that he was accompanying a party of Light-sided individuals from now on, and he gave him his knowledge of wards with one goal: sabotaging the Fidelius around the Death Eaters' lair. Just before cleaning up and leaving, he added a condition to his command: the man would do so only after receiving a coded owl. Harry and his friends had to be ready for an attack or the dark wizards would react and re-establish the wards. And he would kill Crabbe, too.

While he was doing his work, Pomfrey had been inspecting the man's Mark closely, followed by his mouth. With Dumbledore's help, she had been able to identify and neutralize the spells on the man's teeth. She had also concluded that the spells on the Mark had been deactivated as well, although she didn't know how – it wasn't written on the man's Mark that his controlling orb had been destroyed.

While she was storing her wand and rearranging her depleted potion supply, Dumbledore and Slughorn were discussing the Potion Master's recruitment.

“I wanted to return, Albus.” Slughorn was saying. “I really did. Only, I wanted to wait August to do so. I didn’t know they would find me here. Do you still have that spot at Potion Professor?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“What do you mean, unfortunately? You don’t want Horace Slughorn teaching your students?”

“It’s not that, but the fact that my mentor, Nicholas Flamel, is dead.”

A pause.

“Flamel is dead?” Slughorn asked incredulously. “I thought he was immortal.”

“He was stuck in an ambush against the Express, and he fought fiercely, but the opposition got him.”

“I’m sorry, Albus. I’m still volunteering for the job, though. Hogwarts must be the safest place on the planet, right now. However...”

“Yes? You have conditions, Horace?” Dumbledore asked, his eyes twinkling amusedly.

“Yes, and it’s for the safety of the students, principally.” the portly man stated. “You know that Masters ought to have Apprentice to spread their knowledge. I had some myself, when I was teaching. Young Severus, for instance, didn’t have so much in social skills, but his brewing ability was without peer in his years. By the way, what happened to him?”

“He is dead.” Dumbledore replied, having heard the story from Harry before. “He fought alongside Voldemort and has been killed there.”

“It’s sad.” Slughorn shook his head, before noticing that a few people were looking severely in his direction. “I mean... it’s sad that he had to turn to a dark lord. And it’s a loss to the trade, too.”

“Better him off than brewing Morgana-knows-what for that monster!” Pomfrey exclaimed, before turning away, huffing.

“So...” Dumbledore pacified. “To return to our topic: you want an apprentice.”

“Yes.” Slughorn replied, turning his gaze to Harry briefly. “Without Apprentice, a Master can be caught in his own mishaps. Not that a Master should have potion accidents, no... but it can happen. Besides, an apprentice can help teaching. I distinctly remember instructing my apprentices to inspect the students brewing potions while I was teaching. I can’t impart knowledge and verify the non-explosiveness of student-brewed potions, can I?”

“I happen to agree.” Dumbledore said pensively. “When I hired Sev-Snape, I thought his genius in Potions would compensate his... lack of social skills, as you said it. Retrospectively, it was a bad idea.”

“Well, you know, hindsight is always twenty-twenty, as the Muggles say.” Slughorn replied. “So?”

“So? Ah, your apprentice.” A pause. “I have several names in mind, and-”

“Albus!” Slughorn exclaimed intently, nodding towards Harry.

“I cannot tell you if Harry will accept.”

“Why won’t he?” the Potion Master asked, genuinely surprised. “Aren’t you his Headmaster?”

“As you already know, Harry is quite special. He and I made a deal, and I can’t force him into a situation he doesn’t want.”

“Bah! He’s only a student, right?”

“Well... to tell the truth, I didn’t know he was at Hogwarts for two years and a half until his identity slipped.”

“Don’t you see through concealment spells, Albus? I thought your glasses-”

“It wasn’t a spell. Harry posed as a different person each of the last three years, and the last was as Defence teacher.”

“WHAT?!?”

Harry had been emerging from his trip into Crabbe’s mental facilities, and heard the last couple of sentences. “I’m a Metamorphmagus, Mr Slughorn.”

“And he’s quite skilled in the Mind Arts, too.” Dumbledore added. “How is Mr Crabbe, by the way?”

“Quite fine. We can wake him up, now. He’ll sabotage the wards on our command.”

“Did you cast an Imperius?” Slughorn asked doubtfully. “Because, if you did...”

“No.” Harry replied, but he didn’t elaborate. For him the Unforgivable nature of the spell most resembling his mental power was still difficult to think about.

“Alright.” the Potion Master said, before straightening up. “I offer you a place as my Apprentice, Mr Potter. With me, you will learn to bottle fame, and even put a stopper on death.”

Harry and Tracey smirked to each other when they recognized the words: they now knew where Snape had got his inspired start-of-first-year admonishment from. It was all the late greasy-haired Potion Master had said that had been inspired, though.

After thinking about the man’s offer, Harry decided to be blunt and honest. “I already was Apprenticed by Master Flamel, and I have

reached the level where I can already teach the first years of the Alchemy curriculum. What does that make of me?"

"You can continue your Alchemy Apprenticeship under your own steam, or under my supervision." Dumbledore said, earning himself a burning glare from Slughorn. "Finding another Master would be too difficult in the current timeframe. I'm quite taken by my other duties, though, and it would take some more time in both cases, but, eventually, you'll be a Journeyman in Alchemy."

"On the other hand," Slughorn interrupted, "if you come with me, you'll be a Journeyman in no time, and I'll even help for your Mastery. And I'll introduce you to my numerous acquaintances, too."

"Thank you for the offer. Both of you." Harry said, trying to appease the Potion Master. "I will think about it and give you my answer as quickly as possible."

He was thankful for the offers, but Flamel's death had been hard for him, and he didn't want to engage in such a relation with people who were high-priority target of Voldemort's. Not yet, anyway. Not until the monster was dead. Besides, wasn't Potion a subset of Alchemy already? Given the greedy look he had felt earlier and having perceived the intent behind it, Harry was quite sure that Slughorn would love to have someone like Draco as Apprentice. Or Tracey. Or any of his friends, since they were all quite talented. He resolved to speak about that to Dumbledore as soon as they returned to England. In the meantime...

"What do you know about Voldemort?" he asked the Potion Master and soon-to-be-Professor-again.

Slughorn seemed surprised by the question. "Well... everybody thought you defeated him when you were a baby. Apparently, everybody was wrong. Everybody but me. That's why I left, you know? I knew he would come back! And his Death Eaters were scouring the countryside to either exact vengeance on their lord's behalf, searching for signs of his presence, or hunting his... his..."

“His what?” asked Dumbledore, surprised at the man’s sudden lack of words.

Slughorn threw him a pointed look. “Is it really safe to speak of those things, Albus? They are but youngsters.”

“As Riddle reappeared, it’s your duty to inform his fated executioner about them.” Dumbledore said, knowing that all memories relative to Harry – like the Prophecy part he had just imparted – would be lodged in the vault in the man’s mind. “Besides,” he added, “if you don’t, I won’t allow you to restart your little club in the school.”

It took the Potion Master several seconds to realize the meaning of the older man’s first sentence. When he did, his head swivelled to fast that his neck made a snapping noise. His eyes were wide and his mouth gaping.

“What?” Harry asked. “It’s not like I don’t know the beast. I don’t remember how many times we fought but it’s quite a handful. And I had a part of him in my head for some time, too.”

“You...” Slughorn whispered. “A Horcrux... That’s impossible!”

“Why is it impossible, Horace?” Albus asked. “You know I never dabbled in the Dark Arts more than I was forced to, and information about Horcruxes became classified even before Riddle’s first years at Hogwarts. Tell us about them.” he coaxed the round man gently.

The Potion Master was still breathing hard, and Harry transfigured one of the beds into an armchair in which the man plunked down gratefully. A few minutes later, he was gifted with speech again.

“Horcruxes are an evil invention.” he started. “I found out while I was an Apprentice, and my Master nearly cast me out before I told him I was just curious. Since I was insanely curious at that time, he agreed to let it slip.” A pause. “A Horcrux is a part of someone’s soul – or rather, the container for it. To make one requires a ritual sacrifice under the form of a killing, and the caster’s soul is separated in two. It makes the caster almost immortal since the soul is anchored by the

Horcrux: whenever the original body dies, the soul is left to find another body. Of course, the process of finding another body is complicated and different from the Horcrux part, but it can be as ghastly.”

Harry absorbed the knowledge like a sponge, but a question was nagging him. Taking advantage of a break in the man’s retelling, he spoke up. “I had a part of him in my mind. It disappeared, though. But I recently thought I killed him and he came back nonetheless.” A pause. “Did he break his soul in more than two parts? Is it even possible?”

“This is a part I didn’t want to remember, and I never thought about it until now.” Slughorn said, before pausing, wincing at the memory. “While he was a student, Tom Riddle came to me. He was as curious as I was at his age, and asked question about many things. Naturally, I answered. He once told me that he had found an old tome in some library and that it dealt about splitting one’s soul to become immortal. Looking back, he was quite obsessed by immortality.”

“Remember what you said about hindsight, Horace.” Dumbledore said softly.

Slughorn acquiesced. “Anyways... He came to me, one day, proudly presenting a plan where a supposedly abstract person split their soul in seven fragments. The plan was to have a perfect balance in the choice of Horcruxes too: a balance between artefacts and living beings. When I asked him whether that abstract person existed, he panicked and I seldom saw him at our club’s meetings from then on.”

While the Potion Master was drawing a large intake of air, Harry asked. “How can we kill him, then?”

“You ought to destroy the Horcruxes before.”

“And... what are they?”

Slughorn looked at him, his eyes round. “I don’t know. I really don’t know.”

While the three of them continued to discuss about it, throwing ideas and counterarguments, Tracey left with Mr Thomas and Madam Pomfrey to get some food to eat. It was during the meal that Dumbledore came to a startling realization. He almost gagged on his mouthful before speaking excitedly – an astonishing view for the usually calm and collected old man.

“Look at it this way: even before leaving Hogwarts, Tom Riddle had acquired a taste for grandiosity. If he had to choose items to store fragments of his souls, he would choose great things. The kind of artefact that even we would have second thought about destroying. And don’t forget, Horace, that he built quite an obsession about the Founders since his first year.” A pause. “Thinking about it... I remember him wearing a particular ring in his seventh year but he stopped after Easter. I remember because I saw it when I taught transfiguration and, when I asked about it, he told me it was a family heirloom... Quite strange for an orphan, don’t you think? I didn’t have time to ask more because someone made a scene about a failed self-transfiguration, and it slipped my mind.” Another pause. “I think that his most obvious targets for Horcruxes might be things from the Founders.”

“Easter?” Horace asked. “That’s when we he told me about his plan. I remember, he hadn’t slept all night and was ecstatic about it. I don’t think he would have told me otherwise.”

Harry frowned. “Speaking about his plan... you told us that he wanted a perfect balance between living and dead. How is that even possible? I mean... splitting in seven parts?”

There was a long pause, and Dumbledore eventually spoke. “It’s merely a conjecture, Harry, but the murder of your parents might have held enough importance for Voldemort to consider making a Horcrux out of you.”

“Why did he want to kill me, then?” Harry asked, before his previous question came back to his mind. “Oh. Right. He wanted a Horcrux on my dead body. Is that possible?” he asked, turning to Slughorn.

The Potion Master shrugged. "I don't know. But I know there are ways to animate a dead body, making it half-alive half-dead. Inferi, for example... but I don't want to talk about that. Let's just say that he'd have his symmetric parting, then."

"Thinking about it, it would have filled Voldemort's need for portentousness. Foiling a Prophecy and making a move towards immortality at the same time. We all know how it finished, though." Dumbledore paused, eyeing Harry pensively. "Besides, it is entirely possible that the Horcrux actually messed up with the Killing Curse. After all, Killing Curses don't leave marks. Perhaps, after having made you a Horcrux of his, he couldn't kill you."

"That's too bad that I'm not that sort of thing anymore, then." Harry smiled.

Down the table, someone hadn't lost a word of the conversation. Tracey had had little to say until now, but her own experience gave her material. "Headmaster?" she asked. "I remember writing in the cursed diary and it answered something about his soul. Do you think that it could be one of these... Horcruxes?"

Dumbledore thought about it and a smile graced his features quickly. "It is a valid thought. Thank you, Tracey. We will investigate it as soon as we come back to Hogwarts."

"You still have it?" Harry blurted out. "I thought you gave it to the Unspeakables."

"As I told you, Harry, I am a busy man, and the diary hadn't occupied the front of my mind until now."

They all smiled at the feeble joke, and reverted to light discussion, knowing that the topic of Horcruxes would come back as soon as they'd come back to Britain.

As soon as the meal ended, they readied themselves for the trip back. Dumbledore restored the room to its proper state and Slughorn

proved his skill in reversing temporary transfiguration by returning the furniture to its original shape. Harry and Tracey were packing their trunks again when Harry noticed his communication notebook in it.

On a whim, he opened it, and immediately noticed a new message from Powell, and it reminded him of something else.

Harry,

First of all, Josh and Alison stopped by. Apparently, you told them that you were going to Switzerland around this date and they were a tad bit disappointed not to see you. Since you were scheduled to meet a certain Mrs Klein, they went nonetheless and came back with the woman's approval for whichever request you made. They sent you an owl, by the way.

I also told them about your current predicament with the wards. They happen to know several wizards in the USA with links into specialized wizarding military forces, but lost contact a few months ago. Quite inexplicably, they said.

Before they came, I had already thought about your problem, and there is something that can help you. It can be programmed like an automatic turret and can attack from farther away. Much farther. It's called a Howitzer.

Here are some interesting places in Europe where military forces store this kind of weapon:

And a list of addresses followed.

Despite being thankful of the spy for the work, Harry had a card in his sleeve. A card named Crabbe Sr. That particular card could fail, of course, in which case he would try to procure the weapon.

Meanwhile, he had something else to say. Grabbing the pen that was always stuck in the book, he scribbled an answer.

Max,

Thanks for reporting about Josh and Alison. If they are still there, tell them I am on the move – poor owl – but that I'll be there tomorrow. Thank you for the addresses, too. I'll check them if the need arises. I'm on something else right now, and I need your help to investigate secret services again. All of them, starting with MI-6 and GRU, but not the CIA (I took care of that).

Apparently, the Americans found a way to determine if someone is magical... through a DNA chart. They parked those they found in a secret area, and were conducting god-knows-what experiments on them. I want to know if that information has travelled through the counterespionage paths already or not, and where to strike if it has.

As always, I don't force you or anything. Just tell me. Tell me if you need something, too. I can be anywhere in minutes – if I'm not busy myself.

Take care,
Harry
Interlude...

The Centre for Research on Concepts and Cognition was a research lab on artificial intelligence, and it was connected to internet. As such, it had been an interesting place for Copycat to visit and hang out. It was also one of the places which had suffered a massive power failure at some point, meaning that parts of the digital entity had been lost to the world.

Apparently, it hadn't been completely lost, because, by inspecting the traces left on their hard disks, several clever researchers got interesting ideas and created another kind of cognitive entity...

...which they called Copycat, too.
Hogwarts...

The mismatched group landed in the Headmaster's office, most of its constituents looking at Harry in awe.

“Apparation in Hogwarts?” Slughorn whispered after a few seconds.

Harry went to answer but the fireplace flared green and Minerva McGonagall’s head showed. “Albus? Is that you? The device for intrusion sounded, and-”

“It was only us.” Dumbledore replied amiably.

The Deputy Headmistress noticed the identity of the people accompanying her boss. “Horace? It’s really... nice, to see you.” She turned to the Headmaster. “I gather that your trip went well.”

“Indeed, Minerva. How is everything here?”

“Filius is back from St Mungo. He uses a cane but is his usual cheery self otherwise. Mr Ollivander is settled with his tools already. Only Poppy went missing, but I see that everything is fine, now.”

“Yes, Minnie.” Pomfrey answered. “I’m alright, and these gentlemen are, too.”

“I am, too!” Tracey piped in, earning chuckles from everyone.

“Perhaps you can come through, Minerva. It might be more comfortable if you want to hear the whole story.”

“Yes, but... it’s just that Mr Ollivander is here, and...”

“Bring him through as well, Minerva.” Dumbledore replied. “After all, the more the merrier.”

When the stern woman’s head had disappeared after nodding, the Headmaster turned to the two teenagers. “You had something to tell him, I think.”

They caught the underlying meaning and nodded as one, just as the Transfiguration professor and the wandmaker stumbled through the fireplace.

“Make yourself comfortable.” Dumbledore said, conjuring couches for everyone before calling for a house-elf. He told the diminutive creature to lead a subdued Mr Crabbe to the guest quarters, where he was to stay until stated otherwise, and to bring back some tea. He then went behind his desk to sit on his favourite chair – his own. The huge pile of mail on his desk earned a disgruntled look and a sigh, but the old man left it for the moment and launched into a quick retelling of the last two weeks. After an hour, one explanation leading to another, Ollivander began to stare at Harry with a disturbed expression.

“Can I ask a question?” he asked.

“You just did, but go ahead.” Dumbledore replied.

“You came to Hogwarts three times.” the wandmaker stated, turning towards Harry. “Under which identity? And what about your wand?”

‘Here we go.’ Harry thought, before answering both questions at once. “A different one each time, of course.”

“Of course?!?” the man exclaimed. “A wand is something private, young man, and it requires time to fully adapt to your potential.”

A pause.

“I think that, rather than telling you to check your ideas about wand-making against the new schools,” Harry started, noticing that the man bristled at the thought, “a demonstration might be in order.”

“A... demonstration?” Ollivander asked.

“Err... Harry?” Dumbledore intervened. “I happen to like my office the way it is.”

“Don’t fear, Headmaster.” Tracey butted in, turning to her boyfriend. “If he does the same thing that he did with us, we are safe...” A pause. “More or less.”

Harry showed his wands to the famous wandmaker, who was quite impressed at the array. He proceeded to explain that, yes, the wand was adapting to its user, but just as much as the user adapted to the wand. It was the best explanation he had to the fact that he had such success with Marig Klein's spell: he was adaptable, much more so than the average wizard.

After this, he proceeded to test a simple Lumos spell with different wands, ending, to the surprise of the venerable wandmaker, with his staff. This time, he chose to direct the Light spell to the outside of the Headmaster's office, and they all saw the castle grounds and a good part of the Forbidden Forest and Hogsmeade illuminated as though it was noon.

To answer the man's first question, Harry also gave him his alternate identities as well, and the wandmaker gasped, remembering the incident with Riddle and the brother wands.

And Tracey nailed the coffin shut by showing that she could cast spells through her wakizashis.

It was a quite shaken Ollivander who accepted to meet his Swiss counterpart the next day, before heading out of the office. It was still night time, and everyone went to follow the old wandmaker. Once in the corridor, and despite being as tired as the others, one man summoned his courage and grabbed Harry by the shoulder.

"Can we..." Mr Thomas started, but his voice failed.

Harry had perceived the intent, though, and he nodded. "Of course, Mr Thomas. We can talk about Dean. I think that, as his Head of House, Minerva should be included. After all, neither Tracey nor I are Gryffindor."

The man's shoulder slumped. "I wanted to write, you know. To stay in touch. When the Death Eaters attacked, all those years ago, I barely escaped with my life, and I decided to spare my son this fate. I fled. Now, I want to learn about him a bit, to see if he'd like me to enter his life again."

“If you want to know, Dean’s housemate Ron told me about him searching about you. I think he would be pleased to see you. And surprised. He thinks that you’re dead, you know.”

“Perhaps you can help me meet him? Introduce us? I’m sorry to ask this on top of everything, especially as you saved me already, but... you being his age and all...”

“I understand, Mr Thomas. What about tomorrow afternoon? I will already spend the morning in Switzerland.”

“I heard. It would be fantastic.”

Harry nodded, and the three of them – Tracey was there too – headed towards the guest quarters.
Another Road, the next day...

Harry and Tracey left the wand shop with a smile on their lips. Apparently, Ollivander had been surprised to find the wand relics among the comparatively small supply of wand, and even more so when the woman demonstrated the spell. Mrs Klein was suitably impressed by the Master Wandsmith’s experience. After a quick introduction, the two teenagers had felt like a fifth wheel and had escaped. Harry had then been attacked by an exhausted and frustrated owl just as they prepared themselves to Apparate to Genevieve’s place.

When they arrived, Harry braked just before leaving the gaseous reality, his face reddening at the sight before them. Apparently, Josh and Alison were there, and were "going at it" like rabbits. The teenagers moved to outside the door, and, sharing a mischievous smile, they banged on said door.

“Open! Police! We know you’re here!” Harry shouted in a deep voice, after applying a Silencing spell on the side of the corridor: no need to call the neighbours in.

The mad scramble inside made the two teenagers giggle insanely, but they really erupted in laughter when Josh opened the door, unsuccessfully trying to get in one of Alison's shirts.

After magically repairing the torn shirt and finishing clothing at a more sedate pace, the two Americans welcomed the youngsters inside, and the four of them caught up. They had so much to say that it extended way into lunchtime, and they continued over a quickly whipped up meal of frozen food.

They learnt that Genevieve wasn't there: she was taking a vacation with Rupert, her doctor of a boyfriend. Powell was absent as well, a coded note telling Harry that he was on his way to Eastern Europe to investigate the possible leaks on the Secrecy.

It was soon time to part, and Harry brought Tracey to Hogwarts where Mr Thomas was waiting with Minerva McGonagall. Harry started to apologise for their lateness, but the two adults told him that they had taken advantage of the time to discuss about Dean's achievements.

The four of them exchanged ideas about how Harry should appear and finally settled on him showing up as... Harry Potter. The second best choice would have been the Defence teacher's guise, but, since Harry was making his "come-back" this year, he thought that Dean's house was as good a place to start as any. On top of that, it would explain Tracey's presence better.

"Well... if you have the address, Minerva?" Harry asked, and the woman gave it to him, along with focused thoughts about how to head there – she had been there once, after all: if only to deliver Hogwarts' acceptance letter and explain magic to Dean's mother and stepfather.

The four of them linked hands and were promptly whisked away.

It was quite a sum of surprises for Dean. First, his Head of House visiting and requiring a private talk with him. Once in the boy's bedroom, McGonagall told him that Harry Potter was going to attend Hogwarts next year.

He didn't see why she was telling him this, but the woman's speech had a goal.

She told him a shortened version of the Headmaster's tribulations in America, finishing by telling the black boy that they had found someone on their quest. Someone that had been thought of as dead for the past thirteen years: his father.

Dean was utterly shocked at the revelation, but, when the man Apparated in, a glance was enough to confirm his identity and he jumped to hug him. The three other visitors left and, after requiring a private time with the boy's mother, they repeated the story so that she wouldn't be kept in the dark. For her not to head to Dean's room and slap the boy's father, they had to explain that his flight had been caused by his want for her and Dean to stay safe from the vengeful Death Eaters.

When she finally accepted the fact that the man wasn't dead, she still had her own feelings to sort through. After all, how could she tell the rest of her family about her former lover?

After quite some time, Dean and his father had finished catching up for the time being, and Harry entered the boy's room with Tracey to tell Mr Thomas to Apparate to the bedroom of Dean's mother for some face-to-face explanations.

Eventually, Dean and his mother were sufficiently settled with the news to be ready to break it to the rest of their family. His stepfather was quite miffed at seeing a potential rival entering the lounge with his own wife at his side, but relented when the two assured him that they were nothing more than friends, now.

And the wizards repeated the explanations about Mr Thomas' reappearance.

This took some more time and extended into the evening, and the four visitors were invited over dinner.

And, right as the dessert was brought on the dining room's table, the back door exploded inwards.

Earlier...

“Point me, Dean Thomas.” the young man said to his wand, and the device turned on his palm until facing west. He looked to the direction, squinting his eyes to find points of reference, before Apparating there, his two minders following.

They had spent some time jumping around the country that way. The three of them were purebloods and hadn't heard about Muggle phone directories – not that it would have helped, because Dean Thomas wasn't registered – or accurate maps and triangulation. The young man was a new recruit on his way to his initiation mission, and the other were older Death Eaters, only there to follow and ensure that the rookie was doing his job.

Finally, they were in front of a house where they were sure the boy was. Since it was late already, it was easy for them to hide in a shadowy alley to slip their infamous garb on. They then Apparated to the back garden and the young man stepped forward, his wand held in front of him.

“Reducto!”

The kitchen door exploded and he stepped in. Repeating his locator spell, he saw that his target was through the door on his right and headed there fearlessly. After all, a mere student from Hogwarts was no match for a junior Death Eater with experience in Auror training, wasn't he? He conveniently forgot that he had been kicked out of the Aurors for irrelevant conduct.

Before he even lifted his foot to head there, though, a curse beam struck him and he flew through the door and in the garden behind, landing in a heap at the feet of his minders.

‘Uh oh.’ they thought, before drawing their wands and casting incendiary and explosion spells through the destroyed door. They had

the surprise of seeing their spells hit something beyond but without any effect. That something moved and headed out, and they noticed a teenage boy heading their way, aiming a sword at them. Only one of them had the presence of mind to slam his mouth shut in a particular fashion before Stunning spells headed their way.

Harry, because it was him, Apparated out to follow the departed Death Eater through the gaseous reality. Portkeys being faster than regular Apparation, they disturbed the gaseous reality sufficiently for their track to stay for a few seconds. Harry hurried in the man's wake, but he quickly found himself in front of the usual wards around a particular place in Little Hangleton. Scowling at it, he returned to Dean's place.

Meanwhile, Tracey and Mr Thomas were making sure to remove the Death Eater's robes, masks, and anything magical they might have on them, before binding them tightly. At the same time, Under Dean's family surprised gaze, McGonagall liberally applied her considerable skill in Transfiguration to repair the damaged kitchen.

Harry returned and immediately noticed the activity around him. He went to the older Death Eater here and, after stopping Tracey from finishing her job, he quickly built a vault in the man's mind with the same knowledge and instruction he had given Crabbe. The main difference with Crabbe was that Voldemort wouldn't be suspicious if this particular Death Eater returned to the Dark Lord's hideout.

Explaining his reasoning, he returned the man's possessions to his pockets and woke him. Sure enough, the man noticed the now "unfair" odds and activated his return portkey. Harry then examined the prospective Death Eater's mind and, noticing that it was clear of actual crimes, he just decided to insert a Guilt core there. Besides, he wasn't even Marked yet – that had been scheduled that very night.

He then cancelled the rope spell and awakened the man before giving him his wand back. The man fell to his knees in tears when he noticed the assembled people and asked for Dean's forgiveness. Quite shocked by the unfolding events, the boy agreed and the young man thanked him profusely before Disapparating to head a Light-aligned life outside of this story.

“What... what just happened?” Dean’s mother asked, quite shocked by the events.

Her husband was less kind, though. “Is this the sort of things we have to endure when we house a wizard? Terrorist attacks?”

“Don’t worry.” Harry said, sending soothing waves to their minds. “We will spell your property so that they won’t come again.”

“Fidelius, again?” Tracey enquired.

Harry nodded. “Kind of. I think that, given the similarity between the Fidelius and the Notice-me-not Charms, we can apply the reasoning of one onto the other.”

“...meaning?”

“I think I can target the Fidelius to wizards. Especially Death Eaters.” A thoughtful pause later, he nodded decidedly. “I can.”

McGonagall stopped him before he started. “I think that we ought to ask the inhabitants’ permission before doing any long-lasting magic on their property. Besides, you might need assistance with it... and Filius would be delighted.”

“Alright.” Harry paused, before looking at Dean’s family. “I’m sorry about all this. I think that these dark wizards were on a mission to get to Dean as a vengeance on Mr Thomas. And, despite my best efforts to reduce their numbers, it is largely possible that they will come back. Do you want us to use magic to protect your property against them?”

“What kind of magic?” the Muggle man asked.

“It is a hiding magic. They simply won’t find it again.”

Dean’s mother and stepfather looked at each other for long seconds before nodding. “Alright.”

“Alright.” Harry repeated. “Then, I’ll just go fetch-”

Filius Flitwick Apparated with a pop and Harry threw a querying glance at McGonagall, who held her communication notebook up smugly.

“-our Charms expert.” he finished.

“Speaking about me?” Flitwick asked with a smile of his own.

“Our prodigy here thinks he can make a Fidelius customized in the same way a Notice-me-not is.” McGonagall said good-naturedly. “I thought you’d be interested to watch.”

Despite not having been a good Occlumens in the years before, Flitwick had spent a few months being instructed by Dumbledore, and he had built quite a good defence. After the train wreck where he had been wounded, the old man had given him a rundown of Harry’s story. It didn’t surprise him, then, that the stern woman was only suggesting him to watch. It surprised the assembled family, however, although Dean had remarked something. Something that Harry was using to do magic, which he shared with a particular Defence instructor. His whirling thoughts caught Harry’s attention and he quickly conversed mentally with Tracey before going to the boy.

Sensing that it was the quickest and most efficient way to share his knowledge securely, and knowing the other Gryffindor boys would be glad not to have to hide from their dorm mate to speak about Harry’s secrets anymore, he created another of his mental vaults. When it was done, the boy’s eyes had glazed over but they quickly returned to their usual mobility and the boy approached him.

“Thanks.” he said, before frowning. “Hey! I’m the last one?” he asked, referring to the fact that he was the last of his dorm to be “in the know”.

“Sorry, Dean. Your case just didn’t pop up until now.”

“Thanks anyway. And go on with the charm. I’m sure that, with your experience, you aren’t going to botch it.” A pause. “Are you the reason why I briefly thought Seamus had a twin, at the Quidditch tournament?”

Harry blushed under McGonagall’s suddenly inquisitive gaze. “Might be.”

“Great! I mean... That’s interesting.” Dean stated, before concluding. “You should have a go at real sports, though.”

“What do you mean?”

“Football!” the black boy exclaimed, grinning, before turning to his stepfather. “Is the terrain free, tomorrow?”

The man hadn’t followed everything, but the change of conversation was in his direction. After all, as a professional coach for the local team, he had the responsibility of the field. “Not this week, son.” he said, before noticing the endearing term. An approving glance from Mr Thomas made him continue, though. “But, next week, the team is on vacation, the players going in places all over the world. I’d be, too, if I was earning as much as them.”

“Let’s do it that way, then.” Harry said. “I’ll bring our friends to play, Sunday next week, and, when the dark wizards are definitely vanquished, I’ll invite everyone and their families on a cruise around the world.”

That raised a whoop of joy from Dean and approving glances from everyone else.

It was McGonagall who killed the mood – somewhat. “In the meantime, young man, you have a ward to cast.”

“Ah yes. Forgive me, fair lady.” Harry replied with an amused gleam in his eyes, before Disapparating.

The woman huffed, and Tracey could hear something about sweet talkers, Dumbledore, and twinkling eyes.

A minute later, they could all feel the ripple effect coming from the centre of the house, and it shimmered out. Harry Apparated in a second later, and, ignoring the gasps at the house's disappearance, he pointed his wand at Dean and finished the incantation.

Once the Secret Keeper was designated and the conditions enumerated, the house reappeared and the Muggles breathed in relief.

"Let's just hope that no neighbour was looking this way or the Secrecy is toast." Tracey deadpanned.

"Tell that to the Death Eaters." Harry replied in the same tone. "They aren't that inconspicuous, after all. And not the sharpest bulbs in the box, either." He paused, frowning. "Or something like that."

They all laughed.
A second later...

They all cried in pain.

"Crucio!" the Dark Lord repeated, his anger on his unsuccessful followers fuelling the spell better than a power outlet.

Nowadays, Voldemort was less concerned with his troops' well-being, for two main reasons. He had required that random Muggles be abducted and parked in the cells downstairs, so that he could pass his nerves on some living beings when he wanted to. However, when the Death Eaters failed at whatever task he assigned them, his punishments on them went up at the same time. Additionally, he had also successfully reopened discussions with several werewolf clans and a few vampire covens. He was far from obtaining their unconditional support yet, but he knew that the Muggles stashed downstairs would soon help him in that regard.

Voldemort stopped thinking about prospective allies, and his thoughts returned to the punishment at hand.

The two Death Eaters had returned from their little foray with bad news, and, after inspecting their memories, Voldemort knew that there was a new player in the field – he just didn't know that it was a veteran player, though.

Thus, his anger at losing a prospective follower added to his disappointment, and the two dark wizards at his feet writhed in response.

However, this was nothing compared to the beating Avery would receive a couple of days later, when reporting about the lack of mass destruction in Montana.

Voldemort had had contacts with the Russian secret services at some point before the Egyptian debacle, and he knew, from a particular discussion with a team of scientists, that the conversion from mass to energy was the highest energy output one could get. With the spell he had devised, he didn't reach 100 percent of this, but the victim's magic supplied the missing part, on top of furnishing the initial spark and a temporary containment device.

Theoretically, when the 250 pounds of Crabbe Sr. had supposedly been transformed into energy, the explosion should have yielded the equivalent of almost 50 times the largest nuclear weapon ever tested: the Tsar Bomba.

Needless to say, the whole reservation would have been levelled to the ground.

To be continued in next chapter: Hotel California...

Ever since I started this,
I wanted Sioux to appear.
Horcruxes I didn't miss.
I couldn't: the end is near.

Chapter 38 – Hotel California

posted June 24th, 2006

Albus Dumbledore watched the people leaving his office and sighed again, turning to the pile of mail. Using his wand with charms he had designed a long time ago, he quickly sorted the lone pile into several others, according to his qualification as addressee: Headmaster, Chief Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, or personal – and a fifth stack for Order-related business. These piles were also separated following the sender's closeness to him – and, if they were complete strangers, their known occupation. The result was a grid where he could select the kind of letters he wanted to answer before others. Generally, the "Chief Warlock / from Ministry personnel" grid cell was the largest, right next to "Headmaster / from students, parents, or alumni". And today wasn't different.

The old man looked at the largest pile with a wary eye, before turning to the "personal" stack of letters. That one stack was always smaller than the others, and often made an interesting pause in the ordinary occupation of sifting through the various requests the Ministry was throwing onto him each day.

The previous events still fresh in his mind, Dumbledore downed a Pepper-Up potion and took care of his mail. And it was with a particular set of mind that he opened the twenty-third letter from Ministry employees. Like the others, this one requested something from the Chief Warlock: his presence was required to witness the destruction of an evil artefact, that had been found by Unspeakables after a chase of several years. Signed: the Department of Mysteries and the Department of Records.

The words tumbled in his head, and he quickly jumped on his feet, pacing furiously. Artefacts... Chase... Destruction...

Horcruxes.

He stopped pacing mid-step. The sun was barely there, but Albus Dumbledore was a man with a mission, now. He went to his personal study and fished Tom Riddle's diary from its storage. Even with the

thing closed, the Headmaster's peripheral Legilimency could pick the darkness stored in its pages.

That was one Horcrux. An item.

Harry was another. In the Dark Lord's plan, it should have been the masterpiece, being both alive and not.

Since Voldemort had supposedly split his soul in seven parts, one of them being himself, he had to find four more, two of them items and two of them living creatures.

And, if his idea about Riddle's grandiosity was correct, there should be things having belonged to the Founders.

He frowned.

"Things" from the Founders? His eyes travelled to the ever-present Sorting Hat on his office's shelves, and the jewelled sword next to it.

Suddenly, a particular memory came to the forefront of his mind: some time after graduating, Tom Riddle had applied for the Defence professorship, and Dumbledore had refused. Riddle's motive was clearer, now. Much clearer. The Dark Lord-in-making had wanted those items!

Dumbledore shuddered, the thoughts of a Voldemort-controlled Sorting Hat not being pleasant ones.

"Yes," a voice came from the shelves, "I wouldn't have liked it either."

The old man looked up and noticed the Hat "looking" at him shrewdly. "My instinct tells me that you have more to say," he told the tattered garment.

"...and your instincts are generally trustworthy," the Hat supplied. "Gryffindors have always followed their instincts, where Ravenclaws

follow the written word, Slytherins follow the strongest, and Hufflepuffs follow their friends.”

A pause.

“Interesting metaphor.” Dumbledore commented.

“Thank you.” Another pause. “You have too many memories, Albus. Dealing with them by storing them away is an interesting manner, but it leads to forgetfulness.”

“What do you mean?”

But the Hat was now silent again. It knew its message was going to bear fruit.

And it was true. Not five minutes later, Dumbledore had forgotten the remaining letters in his stacks and cleared his desk to make place for some of his pensieves. As soon as they were settled, he plunged in, and that was the last that was seen of Dumbledore until lunch. Later...

“Albus! My friend!” the man exclaimed genially upon seeing the Headmaster entering his office. His eyes narrowed, though, when he noticed Dumbledore’s dishevelled state. “What is it?”

“I need some information, Theo. But, first... what do you know about Horcruxes?”

The other man’s gasp was enough to reveal the extent of his knowledge. To his credit, Paracelsus immediately crossed the knowledge with other factors and inferred a conclusion. “You think that Voldemort did... that?”

Dumbledore acquiesced. “We are quite sure, now. And I happen to have one of them here.” he said, patting his pocket. “An idea about how to destroy it?”

The Head Unspeakable was gaping at his friend. "More than one?" he breathed, before his analytical mind kicked in again. "That's unheard of. How many? And how did you come across one?"

"The one I have is an old diary of his, and I know about another one that had been... deactivated, somehow. How many? I have been said that his plan was to split it in seven parts, mixing living and non-living recipients. I believe that he wants to complete his collections with priceless artefacts, so that we would have second thoughts about destroying them. Things like the Founders' paraphernalia. Are there records about them?"

"Hmmm... You'll have to ask the Department of Records. I don't think we have this in our Department. It's a good thing you were required to witness an artefact destruction, then."

"Speaking about destruction..."

"Yes. The Horcruxes. You know, it's strange to speak that word in the plural form..." The man realized that he was starting to ramble and paused before shaking his head. "Sorry, but no standardized procedure had been found to do that."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that each Horcrux might have its own way of deactivation. True, for artefacts, it's often destruction. But it could be exorcism, for all we know."

The two wizards fell into a thoughtful silence for a while. Some time later, Dumbledore took his leave of his friend to take care of his business with the other Departments. Since he met the Head of the Department of Records afterwards, he asked his questions about the possible tracking of the Founder's legacy. Given the sheer difficulty of such a job, he didn't expect anything, but, to his surprise, it appeared that the Department of Records had started its very existence by inventorying said legacy.

He had to give an Oath of non-divulgence about what he was going to discover, but he also knew that the wording of the Oath wouldn't prevent the sharing of memories through Harry's particular Legilimency. After entering a specially warded room, he was given four sheets of parchment with many lines crossed out. It appeared that the removed lines were about items permanently lost. Only a few of them were still around.

Godric Gryffindor:

- Hogwarts: sword, Sorting Hat – both there by Founders' will
- Potter Family Gringotts Vault: shield, signet ring – family heirloom since 1382
- Leonardo Wright (Maine, USA): armour – acquired through auction in 1971

Helga Hufflepuff:

- Augusta Longbottom: staff – family heirloom since 1249

Rowena Ravenclaw:

- Hogwarts Library: books – by Founders' will
- Blake Lenoir: ring – gift, 1994

Salazar Slytherin:

- Pascal Zabini: dagger – family heirloom since 1530

Dumbledore closed his eyes and sighed warily, before looking at the parchments again. Squinting, he was able to make words out of the crossed lines, and he also noticed that each of these lines had an uncrossed date on its right. Suspecting that it referred to when the item ceased to be tracked by the Department of Records, he peered over the crossed text even more closely. After a long time, he finished with the last parchment and, closing his eyes again, he summed up his findings.

His two findings among hundreds of crossed lines. The two only lines with dates between 1945 and 1981.

Apparently, a woman named Hepzibah Smith possessed a cup from Hufflepuff and a locket from Slytherin before the Ministry tracking charms were unravelled. Dumbledore could have an impressive mind,

he didn't remember about that particular woman. However, he took advantage of his presence in the Department of Records to ask for information about her.

And he found something really interesting: she had been an old and rich woman collecting valuable items from everywhere, and had found her demise at the hands of her own house-elf.

Now, that was something unexpected. House-elves rarely rebelled, and, even though, their subservient nature could only force them to commit suicide rather than acting against their owners' wishes, especially with violence. Frowning, the old man wondered why the Ministry had convicted the diminutive creature.

Convicted...

Dumbledore re-read the old Daily Prophet excerpt he had been given and a tentative smile reached his lips. Hokey the house-elf had been imprisoned in Azkaban. Not that it was a funny thing at all, but it gave him a small chance to investigate deeper. Thanking the employees around him, he left for the Department of Law Enforcement.

It took him some time and a carefully crafted story, but he eventually got the permission to visit the wizarding prison without having to explain his true motives.

And, several hours afterwards, Dumbledore returned to Hogwarts, his head pounding. His Legilimency powers had been strained to their limit to extract and reconstruct the story from the house-elf's catatonic mind. With the added bonus of the mental image of a younger Tom Riddle explaining his plan to a bleeding Hepzibah Smith. Dumbledore had some kind of proof, now, that Voldemort had wanted to use the two items as Horcruxes. He started to cast several standard detection spells to get their whereabouts, and even a few complicated ones, but nothing came out of that, and he guessed that Voldemort must have protected them somehow.

On a whim, Dumbledore went to his fireplace and took some powder. The memories of the imprisoned house-elf had been muddy, but he had distinctly seen something of a link between the locket and

someone called Caractacus Burke. The well-known co-owner of Borgin and Burkes. And he wanted to ask the small man about it. Through Legilimency if needed. In that latter case, though, he needed someone to play interference. He first called Alastor Moody, and, upon ensuring the old Auror's services, he left towards Diagon Alley.

Once again, it took the old man several hours to get things done and he returned to Hogwarts exhausted. The information had been interesting, if not exactly useful. Apparently, Mr Burke had gotten the locket from a woman named Merope Riddle – he had asked for her name – and, given that she had been a witch, there was a strong chance that she was a relative to Voldemort. The shop owner had given her a mere ten Galleons for the Founder's heirloom, but she hadn't objected and had disappeared, never to return. Fifteen years later, he had sold it to Mrs Smith.

Resolving to send Harry his findings, the Headmaster went to his study and fetched an empty pensieve from a cupboard, before duplicating his most recent memories into the stone basin. Once done, he emptied the swirling liquid into a flask and sent it with Fawkes.

His favourite instant messenger bird gone, the old Headmaster went to bed. He was asleep mere seconds after touching his pillow.

The next morning, Albus Dumbledore Apparated to the Ministry as soon as it was physically possible, and headed to the Department of Records again. When Tom Riddle had been a student in Hogwarts, he had been an orphan – and he had been sent to the orphanage for the summer, year after year – and Albus Dumbledore hadn't checked his family ties as thoroughly as he could have. After all, there was a war brewing with Dark forces on the Continent, and that war had eventually culminated with his epic duel with Grindelwald.

Now that he had some leads and the incentive to do so, he poured over old tomes and finally found one reference to Merope Riddle. And his heart rate increased.

He had long since known about Tom Riddle's delusions of grandeur. He had long since known that the self-appointed Dark Lord Voldemort thought himself Heir of Salazar Slytherin.

He had now the proof that it hadn't been a youngster's delusion.

Tom Marvolo Riddle was the son of Thomas Riddle, a muggle, and Merope Gaunt, a witch. A witch whose family tree had a well-known wizard at its head: Salazar Slytherin.

After several seconds to absorb the shock, Dumbledore asked and obtained the last known addresses for the couple and the Gaunt family members: Little Hangleton.

After committing this information to his memory, the old man continued his memory trip and, after transfiguring his clothes appropriately, he Apparated in what should have been a familiar neighbourhood. He had only been there once, though, and it wasn't familiar anymore. Not only the houses around had changed, but the orphanage where Tom Riddle had spent his early years was now a burnt ruin reeking of Dark Magic.

Dumbledore knocked at the doors of nearby houses, only to find them either empty or taken over by beggars or other ill-fated groups of individuals. Apparently, the dark aura around the charred remains of the orphanage had pushed the previous owners out.

Knowing a bit about how the Muggles functioned, the old man went to the nearest pub and, exuding his usual charm, he extracted the story of how the building took fire and burned down... with the people in it. Dumbledore shuddered at the evilness of the crime itself, and he asked if there were survivors, a question at which several people shifted uncomfortably. On top of not having survivors from the hideous event itself, the story was that each and every official not working at the orphanage at that precise moment had been found dead soon afterwards, expressions of terror on their faces.

One of the Muggles in the pub had been throwing anxious glances his way, though, while staying oddly quiet when compared to the pub's usual atmosphere. Dumbledore's senses picked the man's worry easily, and he thanked the men around him, sending forgetfulness waves so that the Muggles wouldn't remember what he asked them. Albus Dumbledore, after all, was the most powerful

wizard acknowledged as such, and mere Muggles had no protection against his mental powers and wandless magic.

Ryan Mac Adam was in his sixties, but seemed much older. Noticing the wizened man approaching, he tried to stand, but the old man's mental powers were now focused on him, and he stopped mid-move. After using a wandless notice-me-not spell on himself and a calming charm on the man, Dumbledore was able to get his wand out to sift through the man's memories – he was powerful, sure, but intensive Legilimency required that he used the wand.

The old Headmaster hated doing what he was doing. He disliked forcing peoples' hand. But he had long since put his scruples in his pocket about that. Ever since he started fighting Grindelwald, he had done so with reluctance. He realized that that reluctance might have been a stepping stone for Voldemort, and he did what he had to do, now, to get rid of that particular menace.

Now calmer and oblivious to the wizard sitting in front of him, the man was drinking his fifth beer silently. Dumbledore entered his mind and spent some time there, sorting memories. It was quickly done.

The man was living in fear – it was the cause for his white hair and drinking habits – and that fear could be traced back to his childhood. He was an orphan, and, like Riddle, he had spent a part of his childhood in the local orphanage. Exploring deeper, Dumbledore found out that Mac Adam had been one of Riddle's regular scapegoats, the acts of retribution worsening after Riddle entered Hogwarts. In one particular occasion, Riddle even left him in a cave near the sea, with no mean to leave. The boy had been terrorized, but he had jumped into the sea below, breaking a few bones in the process. He had had the luck of being caught by local fishermen who had seen him jump, and he had been taken charge of in another orphanage not far from said cave.

That was why he hadn't died with the others.

When he had learnt that his first orphanage had burned in an "unholy fire", he had immediately known that it was Riddle, but a primal fear

had prevented him from denouncing him, and he had continued to live in fear of the bullying wizard.

A shaken Dumbledore extracted himself from the man's mind and contemplated doing something for him. Mac Adam had imbibed two more beers while his mind was being scanned, though, and wasn't in the process of listening to anyone.

Sighing, Dumbledore took a last glance around before Apparating away, his still-active Notice-me-not Charm ensuring he could do so despite the Muggles around him.

Back at Hogwarts, he had the pleasant surprise of finding Fawkes there, alongside with Harry and Tracey. After welcoming the three of them and conjuring some tea, the Headmaster shared his memories about his recent discoveries. They then proceeded to brainstorm about it.

"That's quite strange." Harry started. "Didn't he want to have a mix of living and un-living Horcruxes? And something from each of the four Founders? With your reasoning, he'll need two more Horcruxes, both living, and belonging to either Ravenclaw or Gryffindor. That makes no sense."

"I found something from Ravenclaw in the Department of Records." Dumbledore reminisced suddenly. "It's a ring from Ravenclaw. I didn't include it straight away, but I have to be sure that that Blake Lenoir isn't a Death Eater."

Harry and Tracey smiled at each other and Dumbledore felt genuine amusement. "Don't fear about him or his ring." Tracey said. "We know him quite well."

"Indeed?" Dumbledore asked, in its "What do you mean?" significance.

"Let's say that he's a childhood friend of mine." Harry provided. "I... met him long before entering Hogwarts."

Dumbledore felt that there was more to know, but that was enough for him for the moment. "So, if Ravenclaw's ring is out of the equation, it means that we have to find two living creatures belonging to Gryffindor and Ravenclaw."

Tracey's eyes lit up and she looked at Harry intently. "Remember when we spoke with the Goblins about my family? They said that I belonged to the Prince family." She turned to Dumbledore. "Is it how pureblood families refer to their own? They belong?"

The man was holding his chin in thoughts. "Yes." he eventually replied. "It may be that he searched for the heir for Gryffindor or Ravenclaw. Or merely a descendant: the Heirs are tricky business, especially regarding the Founders."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked.

"To be an heir of a family, one has to be the most prominent member of said family, or magically adopted into it. You can imagine that, the more spread out a family is, the more people it eventually contains, with no control about who marries who or who adopts who. And there's practically no mean to know who can be the heir of Gryffindor or Ravenclaw. A descendent, though... only a small Blood Ritual is necessary."

The three of them fell in a comfortable silence, only interrupted when Harry coughed. "Can you do it for me, sir?"

Tracey gasped. "You think..."

"It's entirely possible." Dumbledore continued the unvoiced theory. "If you are from either line, it would have made you even more important to Voldemort's eyes, and you would have played the role of a Founder's "belonging" on top of everything. Young Neville might have been a possible target, especially with his Hufflepuff blood, but I now know that Voldemort already had something from that particular Founder."

"Neville is a descendent of Hufflepuff?" Harry asked, surprised.

“Ah, I forgot to tell you that.” Dumbledore smiled, but his eyes had a faraway look proper to reminiscing. “It appears that Augusta Longbottom, his grandmother, inherited Hufflepuff’s staff – which is, incidentally, a powerful item for Healing spells. Since it’s a heritage, it might be that they are of Hufflepuff blood.” A pause. “And, since Gryffindor’s signet ring is in your family vault, you might be of Gryffindor blood, too.” the Headmaster finished, looking straight at Harry.

Another pause.

“That’s good for Neville. And for you, too.” Tracey commented, glancing at Harry, before returning to the problem at hand. “We know of some places of importance to Voldemort and of some items as well.”

“We ought to make a concerted strike.” Dumbledore added. “If Riddle has some common sense, he’d have warded the places and he’d know immediately should one Horcrux be taken away. A combined action will prevent more warding on the places we already know of. We also ought to destroy them as quickly as possible.”

“Is the Order ready for such a mission?” Harry asked.

“Quite, yes.” Dumbledore nodded. “Some of them have jobs I can’t interrupt, but others are free. Can you give me a few moments?”

Harry acquiesced and, not bothering to stand up, he Apparated out. He and Tracey had been holding hands the whole time, and she went with him.

“Where to?” she asked.

At the same moment, his phoenix ring tingled and he smiled. “Albus just set the meeting at noon. We have an hour.”

She grinned. “Let’s go home.”

And they went. There, they spent the hour discussing their own situation and feelings. Were they in love or was it the newness of their teenage attraction? Whatever the case, they were mature enough not to push their relationship to the next step. Speaking about it led them to share a few kisses, though, and it was with a start that Harry felt the Phoenix ring tingle, announcing that the Order meeting was starting.

As most of the Order members didn't know who Henry Evans was, Tracey couldn't join the Order as Harry's girlfriend or anything. Harry didn't want her to feel "left at home", though, and he suggested that she joined the Weasleys for the meeting's duration. He'd join her there afterwards. After a last kiss, the two of them Apparated away, leaving towards their destination.

When Harry arrived in Hogwarts, Cassie warned him of the people in the Headmaster's office so that he wouldn't conspicuously Apparate in there. Harry went beyond the office door and, after changing his looks in the privacy of the gaseous reality, he appeared and knocked.

"Enter." came the Headmaster's voice, and Harry complied, noticing the people there. And his Marauder friends. Sirius opened his mouth to say something but Dumbledore beat him to it.

"Welcome, Henry. Since you're the last of our little group, it's time I explain what is our objective today."

And Dumbledore planned, made groups, listened to propositions, and showed them maps of the locations and pictures of the items.

When Sirius browsed the items, though, he gasped and stood so fast that his chair fell backwards. "Albus!" he exclaimed. "That... thing." he said, pointing at one particular article.

"Yes, Sirius?" the older man answered. "What about it?"

"It's in my house!"

It was Slytherin's locket.

It was an easy task to recover the locket from his storage place in the basement of Sirius' house. When Sirius had cleaned the house, all dark artefacts had been destroyed or given to Moody for safekeeping. The locket hadn't given the slight indication of being dark or whatever, and had been stored with the other non-magical Black paraphernalia: in the basement.

"It doesn't seem to be magical." Dumbledore said a while later, sheathing his wand and wearing a confused frown. "But it isn't some transfigured item either. It is Slytherin's locket, which makes me wonder... why was he in your house, and why isn't it a Hor- what we think it is." he amended, realizing belatedly that not all Order members knew about Horcruxes either.

"Besides us and the Order, who has access to your house, Sirius?" Remus asked.

"Nobody." the addressed man replied. "I didn't include anyone else in the wards. Besides, the locket was there before I... returned."

"Were there wards around it before?" Harry asked.

Sirius nodded. "Only those of Black blood could enter or bring people."

"That means that a Black took this locket and hid it there." Dumbledore concluded sagely. "Either before Voldemort decided to use it or afterwards, after... dispelling it."

"Given the time frame, that gives us the Black sisters." Moody growled.

"Don't forget my brother." Sirius said in a quiet voice. "Regulus had been a Slytherin, but it's largely possible that he got killed by Voldemort rather than Aurors."

"Sirius..." Remus said gently. "That's wishful thinking, and you know it."

“Perhaps.” the Animagus said, shrugging but turning away.

An uneasy silence ensued, with Sirius reminiscing about his long-lost brother.

“As much as it pains me to do so, we have to get moving, people.” Dumbledore said, and the Order members straightened up.

One team was going to investigate the Riddles’ last address in Little Hangleton. Harry jumped at the town name and silently warned Dumbledore about Voldemort's hideout there. The Headmaster nodded and selected himself to head that particular party.

Another team was going to investigate the orphanage ruins, in case something of interest was buried there. Alastor Moody was heading that one, the old Auror being knowledgeable in Dark Arts and how to dispel them.

Harry was dispatched with Remus and Sirius to investigate the hidden cave Dumbledore had seen in Ryan Mac Adam’s mind. Harry also told Dumbledore that he’d cast a glance at Malfoy Manor and at the ruins of the Egyptian temple to see if anything could be found there too.

Mac Adam’s memories of the cave’s surroundings firmly set in his mind, Harry Apparated out with his two friends. After flying in the gaseous reality for a while, they found the small cave overlooking the sea. Nothing unusual was present and the three of them were ready to go to their next destination when Remus stopped them.

“Do you think there’s something hidden?” he asked, his nose twitching.

“What do you mean?” Sirius asked.

“I smell... death.” the ex-werewolf said.

The three of them started to cast detection spells and eventually found that one of the rough walls could be moved. Pushing it out of the way, they found a dark room they quickly lit with their wands. It was a huge room with a pitch-black lake in it. In its middle was a raised platform with a stone basin on it, and a raft was tied to the platform they were on.

“Moony?” Sirius asked. “Where does the smell come from?”

The wolf Animagus sniffed the air and looked down. “The... water.”

And, now that they inspected it closely, they saw whitish shapes floating under the surface. To their utter disgust, they noticed that most of them were human.

“The raft is not safe.” Harry said. After blinking out of existence a couple of times, he added “And Apparation doesn’t work. I’ll fly.”

And he Levitated and used the round ceiling to get atop the platform before going down. Once next to the basin, he noticed that it held the same black liquid the lake was made of. Casting detection spells on the basin itself, he noticed that there were Dark and destructive wards around it, and he didn’t dare grasping it without taking precautions beforehand. Unfortunately, no dispelling charm worked and he sat cross-legged in mid-air, thinking hard about the situation.

Beside the stone basin was a goblet, and detection spells gave him an idea about its use. Truth be told, by plunging the goblet in the larger container, he took some of the black water off of it. But the goblet couldn’t be emptied in the lake: each time Harry upturned it, the liquid stayed in the bottom. Absently marvelling at the Charm work, Harry thought more about it. The answer seemed evident: he had to drink the liquid.

He shook his head. He’d never drink some liquid he knew nothing about. What if that was a poison? A debilitating potion?

Thinking hard about the problem, Harry decided to do something else.

The wards around the goblet were impressive, but less so than the ones around the cup itself, and Harry had felt that they lessened when the goblet was plunged in the cup. Extracting his wand with a hand, he plunged the goblet in the basin again.

And he transfigured the goblet into tweezers.

The long tool reached the bottom of the cup and Harry felt something there. He grasped it and pulled, feeling some resistance on the way.

“Harry!” Sirius cried in alarm.

Looking around, Harry noticed that the water around the platform was being disturbed, as though whatever lurked underneath it reacted to his prodding.

“Prepare to run!” he exclaimed, before pulling harder. As soon as the end of the tweezers came out with what looked like a chain, a human arm came from underwater and tried to reach him. Fortunately, he was airborne at that moment, and, grasping the chain itself, he pulled a last time.

With a disgusting sucking sound, the chain came loose from the cup and Harry found himself with another locket, although it was smaller than Slytherin’s one. At the same time, he heard his friends cast spells at the pale human-shaped creatures coming out of the dark waters. They were extremely pale, and didn’t react at Stunners at all. On top of that, Harry remarked that several of them had old wounds on their bodies, some of them seeming fatal. With a start, he realized that they were animated corpses, and he felt no scruple at using burning spells or other lethal attacks.

The three wizards headed to the entrance cave, throwing everything they knew at the unholy bodies. It wasn’t enough to kill them all, and they resolved to flee. Apparating was out of question, though, as the anti-Apparation ward had extended when Harry had taken the locket out of the basin.

“Let’s jump!” Harry shouted, earning himself wary glances from his friends. “Hold my hands and I’ll Levitate!”

And they did just that. Once out of the cave, the two Marauders kept firing at the corpses but the zombies didn’t acknowledge it and returned to their dark lake, the passage closing in their wake.

“Can you seal that thing?” Harry asked. “I wouldn’t like to have my great-grandchildren stumble upon that unholy place.”

They nodded and threw explosion curses at the secret passage. Once it fell, they didn’t stop casting and made the whole room implode under their sustained firepower.

“Thanks, guys. Let’s get out of here.”

Harry dropped the two Marauders and the locket in Sirius’ home, before heading to Malfoy Manor. His reasoning was that, since the locket hadn’t exuded a dark aura, the two grown men could inspect it safely while he was away. Besides, Malfoy Manor’s wards only accepted a Malfoy. His mind disguised using Draco’s identity, Harry entered the impressive building and started to search for things barely resembling a Horcrux. Despite finding several spots reeking of Dark magic – especially in the torture chambers downstairs – there was nothing like the aura emanating from the infamous diary.

He made a quick trip to Hogwarts to see if the others had come back from their own trips, but nobody was there and he proceeded to Egypt. Hidden in the gaseous reality and using every nook and cranny to move his wand in the tangible reality, he was able to cast detection spell upon detection spell in the vicinity of the ruined temple.

And it paid: the Horcruxes were perhaps protected from detection by general wards around places they were stored in, but, once inside those wards, a wizard could find them better. Harry found a gleaming cup in the collapsed rooms that were Voldemort’s private chambers. Not only did it closely resemble the mental description he had got from Dumbledore, but it was also oozing the same stench that came from the diary.

Not wanting to touch it directly, Harry excavated some room around it and Conjured a box wherein he Levitated the cursed item.

And he flew back.

This time, the three teams were there, congregating around two items. Once again, Harry knocked before entering the room, and he magically moved the cup from its container to the central table.

“Thank you, Henry.” Dumbledore said. “Since you just arrived, I’ll sum up what we were discussing about. The ruins of the orphanage didn’t yield anything, and Alastor successfully dispelled the aura of despair around it. Conversely, the manor of the Riddle family was in ruins but it did yield something: this ring.” he said, pointing at one of the two items. The other was the locket Harry had found in the zombie-surrounded cup.

Harry turned to Sirius and Remus. “Did you discuss about the... zombies?”

“We did.” Remus said.

“These cursed cadavers are known as Inferi.” Dumbledore said. “And it requires someone powerful and well-versed in Necromancy to animate one. As you might imagine, Necromancy is a field of the Dark Arts.”

“So... what about the locket?” Harry asked.

“This was inside.” Sirius said, handing him a piece of parchment.

Nothing much was written on it, but it was enough to bring some sort of smile on Harry’s lips. “So, you were right, then.” he told Sirius. “I mean... about your brother. If those are his initials.”

“They are.” the man replied. “And, despite the fact that it must have cost him his life, I’m glad he switched sides.”

Harry nodded, before turning to Dumbledore. "Nothing... untowards, in Little Hangleton?"

The old man looked around, and, following his gaze, Harry noticed that a few members had bandages. "What happened?"

"Apparently, you were right in that Voldemort's base was near." Dumbledore replied. "But we were ready. While I was searching the ruins, the others were hidden, and they successfully pushed several Death Eaters away, only suffering minor wounds." A pause. "It's thankful that we led all these actions at the same moment: Voldemort would have protected or relocated the other items otherwise."

"So... we have two items, one of which is of Hufflepuff's." Harry said, before frowning. "What did you say about the ring? You saw it at Riddle's finger when he was a student?"

"Yes, and he told me that it was a family heirloom. Now that I know without doubt that Tom is of Slytherin ascent, it is entirely possible that it belonged to Slytherin at some point."

"He'd have his replacement for the Snake's locket, then." Sirius said.

Dumbledore looked at his former students pointedly, clearly disapproving of the disparaging term in relation to that particular Founder. He didn't say anything, though, and a thoughtful frown appeared on his already wrinkled face. "Snake..." he muttered.

"Voldemort assumed the shape of a snake at some point." Harry offered.

The old man acquiesced, but stayed thoughtful. "I learnt some things from young Mr Malfoy's memories." he said slowly. "Apparently, when Voldemort took control of that temple in Egypt, a ritual merged him and his faithful snake, Nagini."

"Do you think..." Harry started, before continuing mentally. 'Nagini would have been a Horcrux? Would it be because of that that I couldn't kill Voldemort directly, when I fought him in Egypt?'

‘Possibly.’ Dumbledore replied. ‘Although we don’t know what happened to Voldemort and Nagini afterwards.’

Harry nodded before returning to a voiced conversation. “Now that we have these two, the question is: how can we destroy them? Perhaps we can throw them away...”

“Throw them?” Moody asked indignantly. “The Death Eaters would find them quickly enough!”

“What if we throw them in a place in which they wouldn’t find it?” Harry asked, refining his thoughts at the same time he spoke. “In a place out of anyone’s reach, and where it would be destroyed anyway?”

“What do you have in mind, Henry?” Dumbledore asked. “I doubt there is any place on Earth that Voldemort couldn’t reach.”

“That’s the idea.” Harry replied, his eyes gleaming. “It wouldn’t be on Earth. I was thinking of the Sun.”

Several gasps were heard around the room, but Dumbledore was merely looking at Harry pensively. “Do you think you could pull it off? There are other means, you know... rituals...”

“Most of them Dark.” Moody butted in.

“We can split, if you want.” Harry proposed. “You take care of the ring, and I take care of the cup.”

“I’d rather do the cup.” Dumbledore said. “If I can find a ritual that would keep it whole, that is. It’s still a Founder’s legacy. You can do the ring, and the diary, too. Those are more... expendable.”

“Alright.”

It was a sign that the discussion was finished, and everyone started to leave the room. Harry put the diary and the ring in the box he had

brought, while Moody and Dumbledore discussed about rituals. Remus and Sirius stayed behind, too.

“Are you sure about this, cub?” Remus whispered. “Throwing things in the Sun, and all?”

“How do you plan to do it?” Sirius asked. “Personally, whatever I throw at the sun falls back on the ground.”

Harry smiled. “First, I won’t be at ground level when I’ll throw. And, second, I know that Muggles have rockets that can fly towards a heat source. I’ll merely Duplicate one and use it.”

The two remaining Marauders were unsure about this, but it was mainly because they didn’t know what a Muggle rocket was, and they left the room after telling Harry to take care.

Once again, Harry contacted Powell with the communication booklets, and, once again, the retired spy gave him a location. This one was a missile facility near Kaliningrad. Harry Apparated there and explored the storage area until he found a technician whose mind would give him hints about which rockets he could use and how to ignite them manually. Still in the gaseous reality, he discreetly copied one of the Bisnovat R-40TD missiles still stored there – with its fuel but not its warhead – before storing the box with the cursed artefacts in the rocket’s “cargo bay”: the place where the warhead would have been placed.

This done, and the missile prepared, he headed to the Kármán line – the outer limit of the atmosphere, also known as the “edge of space”, roughly 100 kilometres above sea level – and he launched the rocket. Not only did the rocket use its own propeller, but Harry also gave it an initial burst of speed by moving in the gaseous reality with it. Since Harry was able to travel between Japan and England in 20 minutes flat, the move gave the rocket an astounding initial speed, which would only be increased as the flying object would continue to accelerate.

Unfortunately for his plan, there were several factors he hadn't considered. First of all, the Sun's electromagnetic influence would impair the rocket's guidance parameters. And, thrown off target despite the star's immense gravitational attraction, the rocket would follow an acceleration orbit before leaving the Sun alone.

Eventually, a dozen days after its launch, the rocket would cross the path of a stellar object and crash, causing the Horcruxes to activate their destructive wards and explode. Incidentally, that stellar object was Comet Shoemaker-Levy 9. Not used to such devastating measures, the multipart comet was thrown off its usual route, and 21 large fragments of it would strike the planet Jupiter over the course of the following week.

The cosmic incident would be far from Harry's preoccupations when it would happen.
Earlier...

Voldemort was in deep discussion with three vampire leaders, negotiating an alliance of sorts. He had just been promising some free lunch when a Death Eater entered the room.

"What is it, Jugson?" he demanded, barely refraining from cursing his most faithful follower. After all, there was a reason for that particular Death Eater never leaving his side...

"Dumbledore is nearby, my Lord! Our detection ward found him walking through the town."

"Does the old fool want to attack us?" the Dark Lord chuckled as if it was a good joke, and the vampires smiled thinly.

"No, my Lord. He was walking towards the ruins on the other side of the town."

"WHAT?!" Voldemort exclaimed, standing up suddenly. His armchair was thrown backwards, causing Jugson to cringe. "Send every follower you can find to and attack him!" he ordered. "Whatever

they do, he must leave that building alone! Don't let him get close, and return to me when he's gone."

When Jugson had left, the Dark Lord, clearly disturbed by the news, started to pace and mumble indistinctly about a link between Mr Thomas, Slughorn, and soul fragments, and about revenge. The vampires were surprised at his vehement reaction, too, but their patience, borne of centuries of life, let them ignore what they considered as a temper tantrum.

Eventually, the Dark Lord would be calm enough to realize that Dumbledore must have had a lead to the cursed ring and he'd inspect his other soul vessels. He would be quite angry

The Burrow...

As promised, Harry went to the lopsided house to return to his girlfriend. He found his other friends as well, and, in the privacy of a Silence spell, he told them about the Horcruxes hunt and destruction. Seeing their downcast expressions, he also told them that he was sorry of not including them in the hunt, but Dumbledore's Order wasn't to know about their abilities yet. Especially Mrs Weasley.

Since Harry and Tracey were there, the younger Weasleys asked if they could spend some time there. To their dismay, there was no room ready for them. Seeing their disappointed expression, their mother promised to ask Dumbledore to expand the house one more time when she would see him. Harry smirked at this: one could only question the sanity of the person having enlarged the house to the point of being lopsided on the outside.

In the meantime, Harry wasn't going to be alone, though: he had his own family to see. After an afternoon of rest and relaxation and a cordial dinner with the red-haired family, the two non-Weasley teenagers said their goodbyes and Flooed to the Leaky Cauldron – keeping appearances for Mrs Weasley, mainly – before entering Muggle London and Apparating from a side alley.

Half an hour later, they arrived to Japan. Since it was too early in the morning to do anything, they settled for a couple hours of sleep.

Needless to say, the extended family was happy to see them, and, despite their tired state, they spent the day retelling their school year and playing with the children. After dinner, they went to see Goken as well, and repeated some of their story.

The two of them spent the week in Japan, barely getting used to the different time zone, before returning to England. Dean had invited them to a game of football, after all, and Harry had to fetch the Weasleys. Harry and Tracey wanted to play a small prank, though, and they spent half an hour applying the muggle hair dye they had bought in America. It made them look like some cousins to the Weasleys, with the distinct advantage of not using any magic. Harry had wanted to push the prank farther and make them look like Ron and Ginny – and eventually shock the hell out of the Weasleys by kissing each other – but Tracey reflected that it would yield too many questions from the adults, about their ability to do magic, and he gave in.

Back at the Burrow, everybody was surprised to see them with Weasley-red hair, and, after a couple of failed dispelling spells later, they were equally impressed about the non-magical dye the Muggles had invented. Mr Weasley was particularly ecstatic and, while the twins were making jokes about "public hair" with the other children, the man almost drowned Harry in questions. It was only Tracey who saved him from the muggle-obsessed man, by reminding everyone that the game time was coming up.

Since it was summertime, the children couldn't use magic, and they didn't take their wands – the game being quite physical, they wouldn't have taken them if they had been of-age, either.

When Mrs Weasley asked for transportation arrangements, Harry produced a length of rope which he had charmed as a portkey, telling them that it was Dumbledore's job – which was almost true: Dumbledore had given him memories of casting the spell, after all.

They quickly found the stadium and Dean's family, and, after they had established the teams, the game went underway.

Needless to say, the Weasleys had some difficulties with the fact that they were limited by their own running speed and not a broom's. The twins made a particularly funny show out of it, jumping, tumbling, and falling on the ground repeatedly. On top of this, those who had never played the game didn't know how to orient their strikes efficiently and failed most of their passes. And let's not forget the muggle-raised teens' eagerness to play due to the World Cup that was going on in Brazil.

However, and contrarily to most pure-blooded magical children, the Weasleys had trained with Harry and were physically fit, and the game soon reached a state of equilibrium, exchanging goals and good-natured insults alike.

Unbeknownst to the playing teenagers and the scattered audience, several dark wizards were Apparating in the small town, casting the Point Me spell again and again. The house of Dean Thomas was perhaps protected by a Fidelius, but his person wasn't, and the Death Eaters finally pinpointed their target as a player in the arena-like field.

And they pounced.

The Dark Lord's intentions had been clear, this time: don't kill except forced to, disarm magic-users, stun and kidnap everyone. Given his current negotiations, Voldemort had a need for fresh blood. Given their unfocused minds, the recently-induced dark wizards had felt the rush of power from using the Unforgivables, and they had to think twice before using Stunners instead. Most of their targets were Muggles, though, and they honestly thought that it was going to be a "walk in the park" for them.

They were quite true.

Nobody retaliated.

Everyone was either too shocked or too panicked to do something useful. Only two persons did something unusual: Tracey and Mrs Weasley. In immediate reaction to the threat to her progeny, the Weasley matriarch Stunned two Death Eaters before being downed as well. And Tracey, in panic at being shot without having a wand to

defend herself, tried to Apparate. Her alarmed state made the magic react differently than usual, and she successfully disappeared... only not to reappear anywhere. Opening eyes she hadn't consciously closed, she noticed that she was in the gaseous reality, and almost whooped in joy before remembering the circumstances.

‘Harry!’ she sent to her boyfriend. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Where are you?’ he sent back.

‘I’m in the gaseous reality, but aren’t you going to help your friends?’

‘Nice to know.’ he replied, referring to her current state. ‘We ought to test that later. Do you remember how to exit it? Can you move?’

‘Yes, yes! What about our friends?’

‘I’m not doing anything.’

A short pause, then ‘WHAT?’

‘Don’t you see? They only Stun – which doesn’t work on us, since it only affects the mind-body connection, by the way. I have been broadcasting our friends to play along.’

‘But... why?’

‘Their intentions are to kidnap us. We’ll be brought inside Voldemort’s lair!’ he sent, with an undercurrent of eagerness.

She didn’t reply for a while.

‘Tracey?’ Harry asked. ‘They are preparing the portkeys, now. Are you alright? Can you tell Dumbledore?’ he asked, sending along the needed information for Dumbledore and the Order to Apparate properly.

‘Yes.’ she answered. ‘I’ll warn him. Take care of you. Take care of them, too. If you die, I’ll find a way to resuscitate you so that I’ll kill you myself. That’s the most far-fetched plan I’ve ever seen you produce.’

‘Alright.’ he replied simply, before the connection was cut due to portkey transportation.

Tracey immediately Apparated to Hogsmeade and hurried to the castle looming nearby. She had some things to tell the Headmaster. At the same time...

The Death Eaters were separating wizards and witches from Muggles, parking the magic-users in individual cells and the Muggles in a larger room. They knew that Mrs Weasley used her wand, but it took one of the Slytherins from Hogwarts to identify those that were students there and those who weren’t. And that’s how a red-haired and unidentified Harry Potter found himself in a large room with many Muggles, numerous Death Eaters with their wands drawn, a dozen vampires, and a Dark Lord. Like numerous ritual rooms around the world, there was incense burning, and a cold breeze made the smoke take eerie shapes.

“As promised,” Voldemort intoned, “here are some appetizers for our newest allies. The main course will come soon, with wizards unworthy of our cause.” He smiled evilly. “I know you love young wizards’ blood...”

The vampires, three of whom were elders, nodded and walked towards the assembled Muggles slowly.

Harry had enough information right now, and he decided to act before people started to die. His luck had him in the middle of the group and he was able to Summon his staff discreetly. Calling upon all his power, he whispered one word. A word he knew very well, by now.

“Lumos.”

The small sun erupted in the room, blinding all those who had been watching the proceedings avidly. The vampires screeched for the briefest of times before shutting up, nine of them reduced to ash and the three elders having fled the room through their own form of Apparation. At the same time, the Death Eaters cried in pain, trying to feel their way out of the room. And Voldemort, despite being less affected by his followers, was compelled to seek an exit due to the intensity of the light.

Meanwhile, his own eyes shielded by being on fire again, Harry was busy taking one muggle after another and hiding them in the gaseous reality. However, as there was an anti-Apparation field, Harry had to Levitate them to the ceiling beforehand: he didn't want anyone hurt by a Dark Lord sending spells haphazardly in the room.

When it was finished, Harry looked around and noticed that only one Death Eater had dared coming back. And, apparently, it was a female.

‘Either she's extremely clever, or she's completely insane.’ he thought.

The sudden casting of lethal spell through the room proved nothing on this account. After casting a circular reflecting shield centred on her, Harry left the woman deal with her own spells being thrown back to her and he entered the corridor. He could hear angry voices down the way and, guessing that his friends were being interrogated, he hurried that way, Stunning and Disapparating each and every Death Eater he found on his way. Some of them tried to retaliate, but his bursts of speed took them by surprise and they found themselves promptly unconscious and hidden in the midst of the anti-Apparation field. He only left one of them alone, but it was because he had already programmed that Death Eater's mind to sabotage the wards.

Still, the spells headed his way became more and more destructive as the few remaining Death Eaters started to panic.

‘A pity.’ Harry thought ironically. ‘Such a lovely place... destroyed by those forgetful boys.’

When he arrived close to the first cell, though, he noticed that Voldemort's angry questioning had been replaced by cries of pain. He recognized the voice of Mrs Weasley, and that angered him even more. Apparently, he wasn't the only one, because four cell doors exploded in quick succession and the four youngest Weasley appeared in the corridor, their chosen weapon having apparently been magically Summoned.

Harry shivered at the unusual and frightening sight of the Weasley twins with angered faces, and the few Death Eaters facing them reacted in the same way, giving the four redheads enough time to get close enough to strike. "Close enough" meaning three yards for George and his ball-and-chain weapon, and a couple Death Eaters' masks, along with the face behind, were promptly smacked. Then came Fred with a three-sectioned staff, and more Death Eaters fell into bludgeoning-weapon-induced unconsciousness.

Meanwhile, Harry took hold of the four dark wizards remaining between him and the cell, and gave them a mental injunction before transfiguring their wands into knives – he knew that Voldemort was in there, and he imagined that his followers' magic wouldn't be able to harm him. Steel weapons, on the other hand...

A startled shout replaced the wails of pain, followed by a quick incantation, and Harry knew that he had to act quickly now. Giving off a burst of speed, he Disillusioned himself and entered the room, before grasping the shivering body of Mrs Weasley. He was out of the cell before anyone could notice him, Voldemort and his lackeys being locked in a fight. A losing fight, for the dark wizards: now that the Dark Lord had cast a physical shield on himself, he was free to cast the Killing Curse on his followers.

Harry promptly cast a portkey to St Mungo from a broken Death Eater mask, and he gave it to the four redheads so that they could accompany their mother there. He then proceeded to bring down the remaining cell doors and Apparate the people inside out towards the ceiling. It was while he was doing this for the second-to-last cell that he fell the anti-Apparation ward fall, and he gingerly moved through the gaseous reality to fetch the last prisoner before bringing all of

them in the ritual room, where the Muggles were waiting near the ceiling, still unconscious.

Harry proceeded to awaken half of the people there – so that the whole group could make a circle, holding hands – and Apparated outside: with the wards down, he was now able to leave the place.

Truth be told, a serious fight was going on between the remaining Death Eaters and the members of the Order of the Phoenix, Dumbledore at its head. Harry knew that the Fidelius was gone, and he took just enough time to bring the group down in the street, under Madam Pomfrey's care.

A couple seconds later, he was back in the Order ranks, helping by shielding them and cursing the enemies. Sirius and Remus were there, as well as Tonks, who seemed to have foregone her usual clumsiness: flipping and somersaulting, she was able to curse without being cursed, as well as push Remus out of a sickly green curse beam. The glance the two of them exchanged afterwards presaged some passionate discussion later on, but they returned to the fight with fervour.

Contrarily to their usual behaviour, the Death Eaters didn't flee the overwhelming odds, and they soon found out why: the Dark Lord was amongst them. When he noticed the number of Death Eaters around, Harry groaned: visibly, Voldemort had found a way to recover the ones he had Stunned and hidden. He didn't know that the Mark allowed the Dark Lord to Summon his followers whatever their state of consciousness.

“So... Dumbledore...” Voldemort began. “It seems that we meet again.”

“It seems so, Tom.” the older man said.

Noticing that their leaders were discussing, the Death Eaters and members of the Order slowed their cursing so that they'd listen.

“Don’t call me by that thrice-accursed name!” the Dark Lord hissed before waving his wand. “Avada Kedavra!”

With a wordless swish and flick of his wand, Dumbledore Levitated a wood splinter to intercept the deadly curse, and it exploded in tiny fragments. The old man hadn’t moved another muscle. “Still using Unforgivables, Tom?” he asked mildly. “And you shouldn’t deny your identity. Haven’t you told your followers who you are? What you are?” he added, fishing a particular item from his robe pockets.

Voldemort’s eyes grew wide when he noticed the locket dangling from Dumbledore’s hand. “Give it to me!” he ordered, but his voice had a desperate quality in it, and it negated the order’s impact.

“Why, Tom?” Dumbledore asked. “Is it because it belonged to your mother?”

“Shut up! Crucio!”

Once again, the old Headmaster Summoned debris in the path of the curse before speaking again as if nothing had happened. “Is it because it had contained part of your soul at some point?”

The Dark Lord smirked. “Yes. The traitor who stole it got a just reward for foolishly opposing me. He died slowly, you know, begging for forgiveness... but you know Bellatrix. She’s not forgiving.”

“Liar!” Sirius exclaimed. “My brother didn’t beg! Blacks don’t beg!”

Voldemort turned to him, losing sight of Dumbledore and the discreet signs the old man was addressing to a teenager nearby. “Sirius Black, I presume? What a family you have, by the way. I hope Azkaban was to your convenience. The Dementors are so... resourceful.”

Sirius was so angry that he was ready to jump at the Dark Lord to punch him in the face, unheeding the fact that several Death Eaters were surrounding their master, wands drawn. It was Dumbledore who spoke, though.

“Were, Tom. Were. There’s no Dementor left for you to corrupt innocent minds with.”

A short pause followed, ended by the Dark Lord smirking. “Come on, old man. There’s no need to act so conceited. You are like everybody, and everybody dies. Avada...”

BOOM!

BANG!

When Voldemort had started the Killing Curse’s incantation, a blurred shape had appeared behind him and moved at such a speed that a sonic bang had resounded in the hamlet. The Death Eaters closest to their master fell to the ground, disoriented, while the others felt a painful albeit temporary deafness. The Order members, being a bit farther, only suffered painless deafness.

But it wasn’t because of deafness that they hadn’t perceived the end of the incantation. The Dark Lord’s lips had continued the incantation, and Voldemort looked genuinely surprised, both at the double boom and at the fact that his magic hadn’t worked. He looked down to check his wand...

...and it was the last thing the current incarnation of Tom Riddle did. While Harry was returning to his place in the Order ranks, carefully wiping his katana, the Dark Lord’s head separated from his body and fell to his feet, a surprised expression still plastered on his face. Apparently, his previous physical shield had faded out and, with his Death Eaters around him, he hadn’t thought about a physical attack and hadn’t cast it again.

“As you said, Tom,” Dumbledore retorted, “everybody dies.”

The Death Eaters quickly noticed the fact that their lord had fallen and, not ready to face Dumbledore and his allies, they fled immediately, Apparating out. Harry tried to track them down in the gaseous reality, but they all took different routes and he could only grab two of them, both new recruits.

When he returned, he saw Dumbledore inspecting the Dark Lord's body.

"It seems that your plan worked." he said, smiling thinly. "Keeping his attention, and all."

"Yes, but don't be so sure." the old man replied. "I don't think we are done with him."

"How..." Harry started, before noticing the state of Voldemort's body. It was decaying as they were watching, and only ashes eventually remained.

"The only explanation I have is that the body's magic had been siphoned into Voldemort's new receptacle." Dumbledore said. "When you inadvertently got him the first time, all those years ago, only these ashes remained, too."

"All in all, he got one less Horcrux, then." Harry deduced.

The Headmaster looked at him suddenly, before smiling warmly. "It seems so."

Harry frowned, visibly considering something particularly difficult.

"What are you thinking about so forcefully that I can't reflect myself?" Dumbledore asked.

"Let's see..." Harry began, "we have me, him, the diary, the cup, the ring. There were only two left, both of them living beings."

"As you took care of the ring and the diary, and since I surrounded the cup with all kinds of wards, I guess that he'll eventually return to one of those last two. We will notice his new shape soon enough." Dumbledore concluded.

"I just hope it's not like last time: he was particularly ugly as a snake." Harry said, before gasping. "The snake!"

“What about it?”

“There was no snake here. It was a temple dedicated to snakes, and Nagini wasn’t there.”

“We should investigate the building to be sure.” the old man suggested, and Harry nodded.

The Order spent some time visiting the evil temple before leaving, collapsing it behind them. They hadn’t found anything. Of course, they found several stashes of potions and a trove of artefacts, most of which were dark – and these were promptly scheduled for destruction, especially the blood orbs. They also found a few corpses lying around, the freshest ones being the Death Eaters having fought against Voldemort on Harry’s orders, and the Death Eater who had disrupted the wards. But they didn’t find a living snake anywhere, and neither Point Me nor Accio yielded anything in that regard.

“I guess that takes care of the last Horcrux.” Harry said, watching magical flames removing any traces of the evil temple – and, incidentally, the Gaunt family home that had been there before.

“If Voldemort doesn’t start again, I presume you’re right.” Dumbledore concurred. “He’s mortal, now.”

Harry smirked. “My job will end soon, then.” he said, his hand patting his katana.

“You shouldn’t be overconfident.” the old man replied. “But I hope you’re right.”

“Speaking of overconfidence,” Harry began, “how comes you didn’t get rid of the cup?”

“Alastor and I found rituals to get rid of soul fragments, but they are dark in nature, and I’d rather have another possibility. He also told me that you had a book about rituals, and I’d like to peruse it. Despite the fact that I know many rituals, one can’t know everything.”

Harry snorted. "Tell that to Hermione, Albus, and she'll declare war on you. Unless she falls into depression." he made a gesture of thinking hard. "Don't tell her, actually. I don't want to know."

Dumbledore smiled at the jest, but he stayed silent, waiting for an answer.

"Alright, alright." Harry relented. "We'll see that book as soon as I retrieve it."

The two of them returned to the Order members still present, and Dumbledore created a return portkey to Hogwarts. After a last look around, the Headmaster spoke the activation word, and everyone disappeared, heading towards a debriefing session. Meanwhile...

Being one of the closest to the Dark Lord, Joseph Jugson had felt the Doppler Effect when his master had been so promptly beheaded. He had felt despair upon seeing Voldemort's head falling to the ground, and he had Apparated out immediately. However, in the middle of his Apparation trip, he felt something stirring in his mind. Something that had been there for almost as long as he had been a Death Eater. It had started when the Dark Lord was systematically taking some blood from his followers for Merlin-knows-what experiment, and ended soon after his own induction.

Unbeknownst to most, although it could be inferred from his study habits, Joseph Jugson was a descendant of Rowena Ravenclaw. When he had discovered that little fact, Voldemort had settled to set a Horcrux in the younger man. It had been merely days before his demise at the hands of the Potter infant.

It paid off now, as Voldemort's spirit was quickly reunited with his soul fragment, overwhelming Jugson's consciousness. It had been Joseph Jugson who had portkeyed out from the field in Little Hangleton. It was Voldemort who reappeared in a small and shabby flat in Buenos Aires. And Voldemort realized that taking a living Horcrux over was

quicker than being linked to an item – especially when said item was protected and rarely accessed by other human beings.

The new body of the Dark Lord sat down on a bed on which several unstable piles of books rested. And Voldemort pondered about the recent developments in his war against Dumbledore. The fact that his old opponent had unearthed the locket and showed it to him in that way proved that he knew about his plan, especially after his latest foray in the ruins of his father's house.

The Dark Lord started to count his Horcruxes on his fingers, getting more and more irritated at each finger, realizing that Dumbledore must have gotten several of them to dare attack him. His Horcrux in Harry Potter was gone, as was his previous body. He hadn't found his diary after his unsuccessful merging, two years ago. The old man must have gotten his ring. And Nagini hadn't reappeared after Wadjet sent him back to Earth after his demise in Egypt. Egypt, where the cup was, if nobody had found it. Frowning, he started to make plans, including sending some followers to check on what was, essentially, his last Horcrux. He didn't want to be killed as easily as his last host.

Speaking of which...

He examined Jugson's memories of his recent demise, and he noticed that Dumbledore exchanged a meaningful glance with someone while his previous body wasn't looking. A particular someone who disappeared quickly afterwards, only to reappear after his death, wiping a wicked-looking sword. And the shape of that person was one he hadn't expected.

Harry Potter.

He shouted his anger at the world, only to be reminisced that Jugson had neighbours when said neighbours banged the wall, telling him to shut up. In Spanish.

He fingered his wand menacingly, almost yielding to his instant repulsion at being told off by intolerant Muggles. But he didn't cast the Explosion and Killing Curses he wanted. Instead, he threw a Silencing charm. It surprised him, and, inspecting his mind, he

noticed that Jugson's habits were firmly entrenched there. Including his understanding of Spanish and the reason he had a back-up flat here. Sitting down, he proceeded in rebuilding his mind as he saw fit. Including the Animagus part, although, this body not being ready for it yet, he'd have to imbibe the Animagus-enabling potion again. Urgh.

Voldemort spent a week in Argentina, promptly finding the nearest magical mall from Jugson's memories and buying supplies for his next plan of world domination, including the aforementioned potion. It was torture for him to see so many Muggles in the streets, in various states of happiness at some sport event. Especially as the magical mall was in Brazil and Brazil won the World Cup of Football.

When, a week after his arrival, he felt that his body and mind were ready for taking over again, he decided to leave with a bang, literally. After gathering whatever could be of value into an enlarged trunk, he splurged and threw the Explosion curses he had wanted to use on his neighbours before.

Powered by his hate and resentment, the curses went through several floors, eventually destroying the whole building and killing nearly a hundred persons.

It was purely a revenge for the un-lordly treatment the Muggles had made him endure. If he had been able to, he'd have used the mass murder to create another Horcrux, too. However, because of his initial plan of splitting his soul in seven parts, he knew that his soul was too "thin" to be cut in two again. The forbidden texts he had found about Horcruxes explained what had happened to wizards splitting themselves in too many parts. Many budding Dark Lords had found their demise that way, and he didn't want that. Meaning that he had to find another way of being immortal. Jugson's part of his mind rubbed imaginary hands together at the research prospect.

The Dark Lord needed a large place to hold court, now that his temples had been destroyed – Wadjet hadn't reacted yet, and Voldemort feared that she'd do so at the most inappropriate moment. Going through the list of places he knew and was included in the wards of, he settled for Malfoy Manor, and portkeyed there.

Draco Malfoy was there, but the boy was still a student and had no Dark Mark on his body, meaning that Voldemort couldn't use him to summon his followers. Thinking about it, Voldemort almost cursed himself: Jugson had such a Mark, and Voldemort would never need one cowering follower permanently by his side.

The first meeting was difficult. They had all witnessed his death and weren't ready to take Jugson's takeover lightly. It was through sheer determination – and a liberal use of the Cruciatus – that Voldemort finally seated his authority.

Continuing the meeting in a debriefing sort of way, he asked about the state of the wizarding world. Apparently, the news about his demise hadn't reached the Daily Prophet yet, meaning that Dumbledore knew that he wasn't dead. Bummer.

The werewolves and vampires had met some of his followers, though, and had learnt about his little setback – through the mind arts for the latter and sheer intimidation for the former, something which led to another round of magical torture. On top of that, the night dwellers had spread the word that nine of them died and three elders were injured in a supposedly safe meeting. Needless to say, both groups of dark creatures had rescinded their offers of alliance quickly after that. Double bummer.

Since he only had his followers on his side, now, Voldemort decided to upgrade them as much as possible. After all, he had met mentally strong opponents and expert swordsmen, and he decided to train the Death Eaters in both arts. Some complained, but well-placed comments about the Lestranges and a bout of Cruciatus later, they all complied. And Malfoy Manor was the ideal place to train, having a number of blades available, as well as a couple of pensieves.

As the training started, the Dark Lord selected those who were already ahead in mind arts and swordfight and sent them to Egypt to check the cup's whereabouts. He would be particularly angry when they'd return empty-handed.

His other topic of interest, Harry Potter, wasn't yielding anything either: no mean of detection could find the boy, and Voldemort

realized that Dumbledore must have had the brat hidden under the strongest concealment charms known on Earth.

It wasn't true: Harry simply spent parts of his summer assuming other identities, and thus couldn't be traced using his own name all the time, much like the fact that owls couldn't find him. To be sure to reach him by owls, his friends used Tracey's name, although they mostly used the communication booklets, actually.

Like the previous years, Harry's summer was spent principally in Japan, where he taught Kendo classes with Goken. The main difference with the previous years was the inclusion of Albus Dumbledore in the secret of the Dursleys' address and identities. The Headmaster realized that, despite the hardships in his life, Harry had a loving family around him. And it calmed one of his worries: contrarily to Tom Riddle, Harry had an anchor to stay true to the Light and not to fall into the Dark Arts.

Harry organized a round trip between the Dursleys and the Weasleys, too, each family spending a week at the other's place. Those two weeks ended in a magically enlarged and strengthened Burrow, with Harry's 14th birthday party. All his friends were there, and they had a grand time together.

The next day, Harry awoke quite late, only to find not one of his friends or family at his bedside, but Dumbledore. The Headmaster had a grave expression on his face, and Harry realized that the last three weeks had been too good to last.

"Let me guess... Voldemort?" he asked.

"Yes."

Harry sighed before asking the customary question. "Who died?"

"No one." the old man replied. "But we ought to talk. Can you come to my office after breakfast?"

Harry thought about it quickly, before nodding. "Fifteen minutes." he said, before heading to the bathroom for a quick shower. Seven minutes later, he was clothed and sitting at the breakfast table, and eating the morning meal at a speed that made Ron envious. He wasn't making a pig of himself, though, merely using his Metamorphmagus and Time-related abilities to swallow whole rolls quickly and without chewing.

"I have to meet Dumbledore." he told his friends after finishing his orange juice. They nodded absently and he made a show of taking a sock from his pocket and saying "activate" before Apparating out – it was mainly for Mrs Weasley not to ask difficult questions.

After mentally greeting Cassie on his way, Harry landed in the Headmaster's office, where he found someone else beside the old man.

"Hi, Remus." he said, before taking the man's aspect and smell in. His clothes were slightly blackened and smelt of fire. "What happened?"

"Morning, Harry." The ex-werewolf replied tiredly. "A library is burning."

"Where?" Harry asked frantically. "Are there casualties? What can we do? Who-"

"Harry!" Dumbledore said, grasping the teen's attention. "No one is hurt. Remus had to stay a bit behind to ensure that the Muggles wouldn't remember what happened exactly."

"What happened, then?"

"I had a lead to interesting information about the history of werewolf clans." Remus started. "You see, I'm still in contact with them, even if they can feel my difference. Apparently, Voldemort made offers of alliance, but the clans rejected when they learnt about his demise."

“Did you tell them?” Harry asked. The debriefing of the battle of Little Hangleton had been concluded by a promise not to tell the media about Voldemort’s death, because they were sure he’d reappear.

“No!” the man replied. “They got the information from vampires and confirmed it by themselves. Whatever the case, they aren’t allied with him right now, and probably won’t in the foreseeable future. But, back to the library.”

Harry nodded.

“It was 7:30 and I was pouring over muggle History books written in the Middle Ages – the kind of books which still contain information about witches, werewolves, and vampires – and a group of Death Eaters appeared.”

“Like that? With their masks and everything?”

“Yes. Apparently, they had a list of titles to fetch, because they Summoned several books into a bag, the one I’ve been reading among these. They then threw some potions on the shelves, followed by incendiary curses. After they had Disapparated, I tried to douse the flames, but I couldn’t. I guess it’s because of the potion. I had just enough time to Oblivate the few Muggles there and help them outside.”

Harry paused for a few seconds, before asking “Can we do something about the fire, now?”

“When I left, the fire-fighters were already arriving. There’s no building touching the library, so there’s no concern about the fire spreading to inhabited buildings. Actually, there’s not much we can do without breaking the Secrecy.”

“We can still help.” Harry said stubbornly. “Where is it?”

“Norwich.” Remus said, before giving his hand to Harry and mentally sending him the location.

The teenager nodded, and, after Dumbledore had cast Disillusionment charms on them, they Disapparated.

Finding himself in front of a living fire for the second time of his life, Harry helped by dispelling the magic from the flames, while Remus unobtrusively threw Flame-freezing charms on the fire-fighters themselves. When they were satisfied that no one would die and that the fire would be conquered eventually, the two spellcasters sat back. When they returned to Hogwarts, several hours after having left, the Headmaster asked a house-elf for a light meal which they devoured. At the same time, Dumbledore explained about the rituals he had found in Harry's book.

"That was an interesting read," he was saying. "Especially as I found a couple of Light rituals to get rid of a soul fragment. Visibly, despite not including anything about them, the author knew about Horcruxes. But you aren't going to like it."

"What?"

"Do you prefer reading it or I explain?"

Harry stayed silent for a second before nodding decidedly. "Explain."

"In the way the ritual is worded, and given the wards around the cup, you are the person best indicated to perform the ritual. You will have to sacrifice something, though."

"What something?" Harry asked, rather glad that it wasn't someone – although those rituals were dark.

"Your magic, Harry. But don't worry," the Headmaster pressed on, noticing Harry's distraught state, "it's only temporary."

"So, basically, you tell me to sacrifice my magic for an undetermined time, while Voldemort is still out there, only to keep an old cup I could

throw into the Sun to get rid of?" Harry asked, his voice deceptively calm.

"Why, yes." Dumbledore said, while Remus took a couple steps back.

"ARE YOU MAD?" Harry exclaimed, jumping to his feet. "Not only is magic an inherent part of my life," he began, starting to pace at the same time, "but, without it, I have nothing on Voldemort."

"I didn't say that you couldn't use your powers." Dumbledore intervened, his eyes twinkling as if he had made a good joke. "Just that your ability to cast spells would be temporarily removed."

Harry froze mid-step and stared at the old man for a long time. Just as Remus started to fidget, he spoke. "It wasn't a question, Albus. You are mad." A pause. "Let me read this." he queried, taking the book without waiting for a reply.

A moment later, he was nodding. "Next time, I'll read the thing straight away," he stated, "rather than waiting to be misled by the great Albus Dumbledore." A pause. "I suppose Voldemort created some kind of wards around the thing. Did you remove these?"

Dumbledore acquiesced. "I took the liberty of doing so while you were away."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Thank you, Headmaster. No need to act so subservient. Now, where are we going to do this?"

"I think the Room of Requirements could be such a place."

Harry nodded, a glint of his own in his eyes. "Of course. Why didn't I think of it before?"

"You know about it?" the Headmaster asked.

Harry looked at the Headmaster shrewdly, putting memories of an anger management session having occurred there a couple years before.

Dumbledore's eyes widened. "That was you!"

"As you often say, Headmaster: I aim to please." Harry replied. "Now, are you ready? Remus?"

"Do I have a part to play in the ritual?" the man enquired.

"No, but there's no part preventing you from being there." Harry replied, before smirking at Dumbledore. "I would rather have you there, in fact. With a barmy old man assisting me, who knows what could happen."

After snorting and scolding the teen good-naturedly, said old man led them to the dungeons.

"Err... Albus?" Harry asked. "It's not the way, you know?"

"I know, but if you read the ritual carefully, we will need a couple of common potions and ingredients."

"Ah. Certainly." Harry replied, before grinning innocently. "I knew that, of course. I was just going to ask the Room to provide these for me."

"As you might know, or not," Dumbledore replied, "the things provided by the Room can't exit it."

"Who said we needed them to?" Harry asked, his eyes gleaming, and Dumbledore stopped walking, making him stumble on the old man. "Hey!"

"You are right." the old man said. After a second of reflection, he continued his descent. "Things harvested from Nature are of better quality than Conjured ones, though."

Harry mumbled something about how bad the influence of greasy Potion Masters on ingredients quality could be. The two men, despite hearing perfectly, chose not to comment. After all, Snape had followed his choices until the end, eventually leading to his downfall.

They gathered the required ingredients and invited a curious Horace Slughorn to witness the ritual.

When in the room, the cursed cup was deposited in the middle of a raised granite platform and magically glued there. The four wizards participated in drawing a pentagram with freshly-powdered snake scales, followed by a circle surrounding it. Runes were then drawn on ashwinder eggshells and deposited carefully at the end of the five branches of the pentagram.

His feet magically stuck to the ground and the book joined to his hand in the same manner, Harry took his Nundu wand out and spoke the words of the ritual. Designating the five points successively, he created a cage of magic around the cup. Visible brands of magic flowed from his wand until the cage was so tight that it resembled more a dome than a cage, a dome that bathed the room in a violently blue light.

Harry hadn't thought that the light could be so bright – surely a side effect of using such a powerful wand, he reflected – but he couldn't interrupt the ritual right now. He had a built-in protection, though, and his fake eyes were quickly replaced by globes of flame.

The three men had been able to cast a protection spell on their eyes, though, and they noticed this. Ignoring their gasps, Harry proceeded to the second phase of the ritual: the soul extraction. Holding his hot wand forcefully, he jabbed its end into the cage and uttered the required Latin words. He immediately felt the pull towards the Dark Lord's soul shard and knew that it had been a success.

By now, his wand was getting uncomfortably hot but he didn't dare breaking the cage. Concentrating on the dome, he spoke the final words and focused on reducing it to the size of a tennis ball. When the magic was sufficiently concentrated around the dark soul, he let go, and the thing continued to shrink on its own. As it reached a

needlepoint's size, the sphere acted like a magical Black Hole, and its constituents were shredded to their simplest parts: electrical impulses and quarks.

Unfortunately, Black Holes created in populated areas weren't very popular. In the few minutes that led to its self-destruction, the gravity hole created a deafening whirlwind in the room, and everything that wasn't secured flew toward it.

Harry realized that, by following the ritual to the letter, his glued feet allowed him to stay upright. The three men, however, had some difficulties in evading the fatal pull. Despite successfully Sticking Remus and himself to the walls, Dumbledore lost his glasses and had some difficulties in Summoning Slughorn. The Potion Master was gliding on the floor, his limbs unsuccessfully trying to get a grip on something. Yelling over the din, Remus aimed the Headmaster's wand correctly, and the two wizards finally succeeded in getting Slughorn to stop sliding to his death.

Finally, after consuming everything unattached, including the air, the hole fell out of things to devour and ceased to exist. It was just in time, though, because the four wizards were starting to feel the lack of air, and also because the Deputy Headmistress, drawn by the ruckus, opened the door. The difference of air pressure made the door bang against the wall and air rush inside, knocking the venerable woman down.

When she looked up, she noticed the strange happenstance: Harry was barely keeping upright, only standing with the help of... the Sticking charm on his feet. A smell of charred flesh came from him, and she quickly removed the white-hot wand from his hand before more damage was incurred. She then noticed his eyes. They weren't ablaze anymore, but had reverted to what they looked like after the god fight in the Mexican plane: balls of water surrounded by scar tissue.

As she was stepping back, her feet came in contact with the still-glued cup and she unceremoniously fell on her rear end, taking sight of the three other wizards in the room.

“Albus!” she exclaimed, before rushing to the old man’s side and trying to pull the portly Potion Master off the Headmaster’s chest.

Apparently, when the Black Hole had disappeared, the Summoning spell that had countered its effect on Slughorn acted fully, and Remus and Dumbledore had been knocked by the fast-moving Potion Master.

It took a moment for Minerva McGonagall to unglue everything and wake the four wizards, and the four adults started to look at Harry with wary gazes.

“Harry?” Dumbledore enquired. “What happened to your eyes?”

“I don’t know.” the boy answered. “They have been like that since... the accident.”

“The accident?” Remus asked worriedly. “Which accident?”

“It happened before Hogwarts.” Harry replied. “I usually hide them, but I needed them right now. To shield against the light, you know?”

A pause.

“Harry, my boy, you never cease to amaze me.” Dumbledore said warmly, before frowning. “We ought to see Madam Pomfrey, though, if only to know what they are.”

Harry was reluctant, but, since it could help him in the long term, he complied. Before they left the room, though, he Conjured a quill and made annotations in the book about the cyclone-like effect and the fact that witnesses ought to be Stuck to something as well.

Madam Pomfrey only found out that his eyes were made of salty water. She didn’t find anything magical about them. Although her results made her frown. “I don’t quite understand how it is even possible.” she told them. “There is only a residual impression of magic, but it is so faint that it can’t be any long-lasting spell. It’s like...” She stopped suddenly.

“Like?” Dumbledore prodded her.

The Medi-witch turned to him. “Albus, I felt this only twice in my whole life. Once, it has been on a muggle-born witch that I haven’t been able to cure from a non-magical ailment. She returned from her summer completely healed and I felt nothing but that same strange kind of residual magic.”

“And the second time?”

“It was when I tested Bill Weasley. When he was sporting these white wings. It wasn’t residual, then, it was his entire body. But the feeling of strangeness was the same.”

Harry had felt something when Pomfrey had spoken of the woman, earlier, and, while the others thought about the problem, he addressed her. “What kind of ailment had the woman? And who was she, by the way?”

“Mr Potter... it was your mother. She couldn’t bear children. Given your presence here, her travel to a place named Lourdes seems to have been successful.”

Harry was stumped. Too many information and ideas were flying around his mind, and he took the appropriate course of actions: he fainted.

When he awoke, only Remus had remained to his side. “Is it true, Moony? I didn’t hear wrongly? You know, perhaps my hearing was impaired by the ritual, and-”

“You are rambling, Harry.” the man interrupted with a smile. “I heard the same thing, and I now remember that Lily was increasingly distraught by something, starting in her third year. She would always say that it was girl things, but I didn’t know about what it was until now. During her seventh year, though, she was more relaxed about things, and started dating only then. And she dated only one man: despite her numerous suitors, your father was her only catch.”

“Thank you.” Harry said, bringing his hands to his ears. “I don’t need information about my parents’ sex life, though.”

“I wouldn’t dare telling you.” Remus replied, chuckling. “It’s not as if I knew anything, anyway.”

“Good.” Harry paused, looking around. “Where are the others?”

“Dumbledore came to the conclusion that what Madam Pomfrey felt...”

“Yes? What is it?”

“Well... since you spent some time in France and since you were raised in the muggle world, you know what Lourdes is.”

Harry nodded, waiting for the explanation.

“Apparently, she felt divine magic, there.”

A pause.

A long pause.

“Divine...” Harry breathed, remembering something relative to his guardian spirit, his Nahual. He swallowed, and nodded decisively. “Alright.”

“Alright what?” Remus asked, surprised by the boy’s lack of reaction. When Dumbledore had suggested it, a verbal joust had occurred between him and the recently-recruited Potion Master. The topic of religion wasn’t well accepted in the wizarding world.

“I believe him.” Harry told his friend. “After all, I did meet some strange things, over the years. My mind is as open as one can be.”

“While staying the tightest fortress I’ve ever seen.” Remus deadpanned.

After a second of looking at each other, the two of them laughed heartily, the happy sound echoing in the empty infirmary, and, through the open door, into the castle proper.

A dozen days later, in Japan...

Harry looked at the assembled people and smiled. Besides his extended family, here were all his close friends. Around these people, he didn't have to maintain façades. Around these people, he could be himself. And everyone looked forward to the Obon festival.

Come the week-end, he would regret inviting them all.

To be continued in next chapter: Sunday, Bloody Sun Day...

Horcruxes in short supply,
How will Voldemort react?
There are things I won't imply
Because that would throw the act.

Chapter 39 – Sunday, Bloody Sun Day
posted August 19th, 2006

Voldemort was excited.

His forces had dwindled to a mere couple dozen, but half of them were survivors from Little Hangleton, and the others had just finished a special training session by the best people in Knockturn Alley, and they would give proof of their abilities soon. His first real public appearance after the whole fiasco in the Scottish hamlet.

“You ought to know your task, by now.” he addressed his followers. “Let’s go.”

For the old-school dark wizards, it would be a political test, as they would barge in the Ministry and play interference, while the newly-trained ones would go to their baptism of fire. That would be their last test before launching the mission to find the Potter brat.

The merchants of Diagon Alley were getting to their summer businesses – minus the wand shop, of course – and students and other customers were coming and going, when a group of wizards appeared at the Apparation point. Unheeded, the dozen ordinarily-clad and smiling wizards swiftly walked to the middle of the Alley. When they were there, though, they removed the illusion that was showing a smiling face on their white mask and ordinary robes on their black ones.

And people screamed.

Too quickly for the four Aurors in position to get their wands out, the dark wizards threw the Killing Curse at each of them. The police force taken care of, the Death Eaters started to throw dark curses around. The passer-bys had long since dropped their shopping bags and were running to avoid them, giving a chaotic appearance to the street.

A few wizards and witches tried to throw shields at their families and friends, while others returned fire. However, the Death Eaters had shields as well, and no spell touched them. And, in retaliation, they threw more Killing Curses around, targeting the resisting people first.

When the street was finally empty, save for the bodies strewn around and the discarded items, the group of Death Eaters separated, the one in the middle standing higher than the others. Voldemort looked around, satisfied, and he aimed upwards.

“Morsmordre!”

The sky darkened over Diagon Alley, and wisps of green fluttered around, grouping as the double drawing of the Dark Mark took shape. When the snake-eating skull was fully formed, Voldemort smirked. In the same way he had improved the Dark Mark on his followers' skin, he had enhanced the one now floating in the warm Sunday afternoon air.

It wouldn't be dispelled for a long time.

Looking around for a last time, he took his portkey out and activated it, promptly followed by the Death Eaters.

Japan, a week later...

Once again, the festival was a flurry of activities. People danced in the streets and prayed their ancestors. Harry and his friends had mingled with the crowds, using the excuse of being visiting students when asked to explain their presence at the parts where most of those in attendance were Japanese.

All in all, they had spent the whole Saturday on "active vacation", a term used by Hermione to designate those holidays where one was using his brain instead of just lounging around – to Ron's dismay.

However, now that he was using his own name more often than not and not particularly shielding that fact, Harry had attracted a particularly unwelcome problem.

They were having lunch at Goken's place with his friends, that Sunday, when Fate reared its ugly head again.

A bit earlier...

The dark alley was empty. Suddenly, one man appeared out of thin air and looked around. Seeing no one, he pressed his forearm and a group of wizards appeared in the same way. Ignoring his followers' temporary dizziness at being so roughly moved through space, Voldemort extracted his latest wand from its resting place and incanted.

“Point Me, Harry Potter!”

For the umpteenth time in the preceding week, the incantation yielded a positive result, and the wand pointed to a particular direction instead of spiralling aimlessly. The Dark Lord pocketed his wand and directed his followers towards the fence-protected mansion the wand had pointed to.

“It's not the same place than the one we got last time.” he said to his troops. “He must be moving around, and, since the spell yields nothing at nights, I gather his home must be protected by some ward.” Voldemort's voice was then lowered to a whisper. “Damn Dumbledore! Why Japan, of all places? Is it because it's the farthest from Britain?”

Despite the Dark Lord's newfound will to research things in depth, it hadn't reached his mind that Dumbledore might not be in league with Harry on the particular topic of the latter's summer holidays.

“I don't want him to flee again.” Voldemort told his minions, a maniacal glint in his eyes. His right hand twitched nervously and more than half of the Death Eaters present exchanged worried looks. “By looking through the fence, I noticed a large house – obviously the target of our Point Me spells – and a courtyard. We will all Apparate there and restore our proper attire, and I'll cast an anti-Apparation field while you charge in the house.”

And, foregoing subtlety completely, they did just that. The Dark Lord had a couple of aces up his sleeve, though.

Goken stopped mid-sentence in the middle of a joke, and he looked around with a troubled expression.

Harry was the first to notice the authenticity of his mentor's concern. "What is it?" he asked.

"We've unwanted visit-" the man replied, and the rest of his words were drowned by the sound of explosions coming from the manor's corridors.

By now, no one had to tell Harry's friends to grab their weapons and prepare to fight. As one, they sprung to their feet and Summoned their weapons of choice. Their initial aim was to Apparate out to meet the assailants in the corridor itself – from the moment Tracey had been able to enter the gaseous reality at will, she and Harry had worked to isolate the necessary mental process, and they had spread the information to their friends.

The first to Apparate out was Harry, but he reappeared half a second later, his limbs shaking in pain. After calming himself, and while the dark wizards were making their way towards them, he summed up his experience. Apparently, Voldemort had made good use of Jugson's mind and the books that had been stored in Brazil. In the previous week, the Dark Lord had perfected a variant of the famous anti-Apparition ward, linking it with an effect nearly equivalent to the infamous Cruciatus curse.

Knowing that that particular way out was removed, Harry's friends made a good use of the Disillusionment charm before spreading to take positions around the room. However, because of the Horcrux-removal ritual he had experienced before, Harry was unable to cast spells by himself, and he had to be Disillusioned by Tracey.

It took some more time for the Death Eaters to reach them. Each time they broke in a room, they showered it with spells, to damage everything and possibly everyone there. They then threw a couple of detection charms to be sure that nobody was magically hidden in the rubble. The students quickly understood the tactic, and they Transfigured obstacles in front of them and everywhere in the room, before charming them with reflective shields. Their own shields in place, they were finally ready for the onslaught.

It didn't come as they had thought, though.

Goken's face had been darkening as the events progressed, and the man was getting angrier by the second. He, great Samurai of Japan, waiting the enemy like a weasel in its burrow? Not likely!

Before Harry could intervene – he was with Tracey, getting Shielded and Levitating the sharpshooters onto the ceiling timbers – the man shot to the sliding doors and opened them wide, shouting his fury to the black-robed wizards and witches there.

There was a lull as each party took notice of the man's action.

Then, a flurry of spells came from both sides. The Death Eaters showered the man with Cruciatus curses, Explosion curses, and other painful spells, while Harry's friends acted differently: they simply Summoned the man to them. The volley of coloured beams from the dark wizards tore the area where Goken was to shreds but he was relatively unharmed – if you didn't speak about his dignity, of course.

Still, the enemies knew where they were, now, and they headed there, skipping a couple of rooms in the way. Incidentally, it eased Goken's mind tremendously since his ancestor's shrine was just before the training room they were in: it wouldn't do for the imagery of his ancestry to burn to ashes during the festival dedicated to them, after all.

The first seconds of the ensuing skirmish were uneasy. Susan and Hermione were wary of taking human lives like that, and their arrows, aimed at limbs, were only directed to maim. Unfortunately, it gave away their position quite easily, and they had to take cover after the first volleys of arrows.

At the same time, the others were using their spells to inflict maximum non-lethal damage onto Voldemort's ranks. Protected by the mats transfigured into barricades and magically reinforced, the students used Disarming and Summoning charms to get their enemies' wands, Binding and Blinding spells, and Transfiguration to sink them in quick-drying mud.

Using his katana, properly Shielded, Goken was sending the enemies' spells back to them, while sidestepping the Unforgivables he couldn't redirect – he had been briefed on them way beforehand.

And Harry, despite not able to use spells, was doing the same, keeping a part of his mind on his remaining powers: Levitation and Mind Arts. Three Death Eaters flew to the ceiling, knocking themselves out in the process. And two of them fell into a catatonia before the remaining Death Eaters fled.

“Yes!” Ron shouted, amidst the victory cheer coming from the relatively unharmed defenders.

“I don't believe that they really fled.” Harry mused, his senses picking the Death Eaters' position.

“Why?”

“They are just down the corridor, out of view. Look!”

And, in front of their eyes, most of the fallen Death Eaters were Summoned to their brethren.

“Much ado... for nothing...” Hermione whispered, much like her namesake's author.

“They'll revive them.” Tracey added dejectedly.

“Yes.” Harry confirmed. Apart the catatonic ones, nothing prevented the dark practitioners from doing exactly that before returning to battle. “Let's focus. They will come back.”

It was true, but they wouldn't see the Death Eaters. They hadn't fled far. Their tactic had been rehearsed beforehand and the Dark Lord wouldn't have them fleeing mere students. As Harry noticed, they had simply Summoned their colleagues from down the hall, reviving those whom they could and using healing potions and salves wherever needed. They had come prepared.

Likewise, the Dark Lord had come with a clear idea of successful tactics, taken from his previous encounters with Harry – even if he still didn't know it was Harry all along. The teenager had liberally used reflecting spells in his previous battles, and Voldemort, using his research-oriented mind, had also instructed his troops to use the same tactics if they could. And they could.

The Dark Lord had joined his troops, now, and, targeting some debris near the door, he applied a particular shielding charm he had perfected recently as well: it was like a one-way mirror on top of reflecting spells. Spells from individuals envisioned during the spell incantation were reflected according to a natural angle, while spells from others were reflected to their source.

“What is it?” Susan asked from her raised position. She was looking at the door, and everyone noticed the debris there being Transfigured into a triangular shape, much like an opaque prism.

They started to wonder about it, but quickly reined their minds: they knew that wondering during a magical battle only yielded defeat. So, they started to cast spells at it.

“Watch out!”

They quickly noticed that their spells were sent back, and, seeing Explosion curses coming from the corridor and being reflected toward them by the prism-like object, they took cover.

While some curses struck unprotected areas, reducing them to rubble, others met the students' barricades and were sent back, only to return to the barricade by the Dark Lord's reflecting shield. Apparently, the magical signature was changed sufficiently after a couple rebounds for the mirror to block the spell the second time.

The bright beams went back and forth for some time, rapidly joined by others from the corridor. Quickly, the intensity of spells in the room reached an unbearable level and everyone covered their eyes. Everyone bar Harry, whose eyes were now covered in flames, protecting them from harm.

And he was the only one to notice that the flurry of spells was bringing the shield charms down.

“The shields!” he shouted, but it was too late. The bright beams tore at the Transfigured obstacles and some of them struck the blinded students head on, and they fell to the floor, writhing in agony...

...for a few seconds.

But nothing else happened, and they slowly got to their feet again, wondering about the sparks that were dancing on them.

“I wonder...” Harry mused, before looking around with his eyes of flame. “Let’s cast something, my friends.” he called. “Remember those times when we practised the Patronus? Do it.”

“Expecto Patronum.” came the collective answer.

When their Patronuses appeared, larger and more solid than they had always been able to cast, Harry’s intuition solidified as well.

Being flown back and forth for so long, the curses had morphed so much that they were nothing more than rays of magic, and, despite bringing the barricades down and striking the students hiding behind, they did nothing but infuse them with additional magic. Too much magic was dangerous to keep, though, hence the use of the Patronus to send it away.

And the magic animals had the added benefit of intercepting spells as well, gaining in strength each time. The only spells that passed through were stopped by the students’ personal shields.

“What are we going to do with them?” Ron asked, looking at the large white badger in front of him with wide eyes. It was almost larger than he was.

“We have to take drastic measures.” Harry said, looking at each of them in the eye. “If we don’t, it is going to be a long battle.” A pause.

“Voldemort is here, too. Let’s aim at him first. Remember that it’s like exterminating vermin.”

They understood, and, despite some of them having second thoughts, they remembered their previous battles and ordered their animals forward, towards the corridor and the dark wizards.

The prism-like mirror was still acting its weird self and ricocheting dark curses, but the Patronuses absorbed them without difficulty, before entering the corridor proper and being targeted directly towards the Death Eater group. Once there, their magical senses quickly perceived the Dark Lord’s identity despite his new body, and they pounced.

It is necessary to note, at this point, that Jugson’s resources, combined with Voldemort’s, had produced a particularly clever entity, and that that entity had mentally explored its recent defeats and researched means to avoid being beaten in the same way again. As such, the Dark Mark had been enhanced once more, and the magical beasts’ attacks weren’t felt by Voldemort.

Not at all.

His followers, on the contrary...

When two of them fell of magical exhaustion, their magic gone through the Mark to protect Voldemort, the Dark Lord decided to cast another spell, specially designed to deal with living manifestations of magic. Like Patronuses.

“Incarcerous Patronum.”

Ropes surged forward, but not physical ropes. These were sizzling with malevolent power, and the Death Eaters ducked under them as the ropes flew towards the largest Patronus. In pain for the first time in its life, the luminescent creature howled and tried to rage against the link that tied it to the Dark Lord’s wand. However, Voldemort made a backwards motion with his wand, and, the ropes taut, the beast fell and slid towards him. Once it was touched by the tip of the

Dark Lord's wand, it started to deflate, diminishing in size as it was visibly absorbed, through the wand, by Voldemort.

The other Patronuses, noticing this, attacked the Dark Lord with desperate energy, only succeeding in bringing the other Death Eaters down. And, one after the other, they fell to the binding spell. Voldemort was so charged in energy after absorbing seven of them that he simply tore through the others with regular spells – regular, but supercharged nonetheless: the first explosion curse he threw, aimed at an annoying owl, opened a hole in the ceiling large enough to bring a zeppelin through.

The Dark Lord was feeling sure of himself, but he still applied some of his new thoughts about Animagus transformations to make himself grow a poisonous sting much like a scorpion's – one of Jugson's mascots. After casting a couple shielding charms as well, he walked to the door. There, he was treated to a scene he liked very much.

Because of the unnatural demise of their Patronuses, seven of the students there were unconscious, lying there defenceless, while the others weren't faring much better, kneeling with the evident signs of a massive headache. Goken was kneeling near Susan and Hermione, having caught them when they had fallen from the roof. And Harry was near Tracey, doing his best to push her migraine away. He didn't have one for the simple reason that he hadn't been able to cast his Patronus.

"Voldemort." Harry said simply.

"Harry Potter." the Dark Lord intoned, his voice crackling with power. "Finally."

"I wouldn't say 'Finally' if I were you. We met enough times in the past." Harry said, images of his previous fights to the forefront of his mind, where he was sure Voldemort would get them. Given the situation, his main advantage was to surprise the evil overlord.

Seeing the man's face, where confusion led way to astonishment, he knew he had been successful in disturbing him, and he threw his sword at him, tip first.

However, the sword met the physical shield and fell to the ground, clanking loudly. The throw and the sound awoke Voldemort somewhat, and, screaming his discontent, he made a swipe with his tail towards Harry, who hadn't noticed it.

Klang!

The tip of the poisonous sting was near Harry's head, but it was embedded in a golden shield. Harry looked around, and he noticed that Luna had gotten over her headache somehow, and she was readying her other shield.

"Avada..." the Dark Lord started, but he didn't finish and his eyes opened wide at the missile the young blonde had sent him. Luna liked to surprise her opponents, and using shields as thrown weapons was a sure way to do so. Especially when one used Transfiguration and enlarging charms to augment said weapon. As it was, the Dark Lord found himself thrown back into the corridor, through the inside wall, and pinned to the outside wall – that one was made of stone, and it still cracked under the pressure – by the transfigured shield. A 3-ton mass of steel. With spikes.

The young students began to smile, but the heavy missile moved a couple of times, before being pushed away. Being supercharged, Voldemort's shields had protected him, mostly, but he still sported a bleeding nose, which was unbecoming to a Dark Lord. The man was truly incensed, now, and he wasted no time in throwing Killing Curse after Killing Curse at everyone in the room. The living ones could sidestep the curse quite easily. The unconscious ones, though...

To his dismay and rapidly growing anger, the blond Ravenclaw seemed to know beforehand where he was going to strike, and she raised some physical protection before the fallen, just before each strike. However, verifying the saying that a Seer's expertise wasn't centred on themselves, Luna was looking at Tracey, mouthing "Hurry up", just as one of these green beams struck her.

“Noooooooo!” Harry yelled, before grinding his teeth. He couldn't rush to his friend's side. Not right now. And he couldn't do anything for her anymore, anyways. Just as he was going to let his anger disrupt the carefully established plan, he felt Tracey giving him something.

Retaking control over his emotions, he smirked at the Dark Lord and then made the largest gambit of his life.

“Come to get this?” he asked, his hand extended forward and showing Hufflepuff's cup – that is, the result of Tracey's spellwork with Harry's directions.

It really resembled the cup physically, and a small ward had been added to it with the twin effect of preventing Apparation around it and resembling the original wards around the Horcrux.

Voldemort's eyes focused on the cup and widened, and Harry, using all his strength in a swift motion, threw it upwards, through the ruined roof. Voldemort immediately Summoned it, though, but Tracey had had time to throw a complicated spell at his feet. It wasn't exactly a spell targeting him, and his personal shield didn't protect the dark wizard against it. In fact, it was quite innocuous at the beginning, only forming a trembling iridescent sphere around the Dark Lord, much like a soap bubble.

Voldemort noticed it immediately, though, almost at the same time he recognized the Horcrux as being a fake.

“What is this?” he asked, brandishing the cup.

Nobody answered, and the only three able to think coherently looked at him with expectation in their eyes. Either Hermione's research work on Nimue's spell had been successful... or not.

Voldemort grinned, and, aiming his wand in front of him, he spoke one spell. A spell he'd regret for some time.

“Finite Incantatem.”

He had aimed at the bubble. He had not wanted to cast spells through an unrecognisable field. However, that was precisely what the others wanted. The bubble, using the magic from the Dark Lord’s spell, solidified and hid Voldemort from the outside world. From then on and until he was freed, all spells used against the sphere would reinforce it.

Voldemort would find a way to pass through, though. After all, it was a spell researched by a school girl and cast by another, and the darkest wizard of the century would find a way around it, eventually.

They knew it.

And that’s why it wasn’t the ultimate part of their plan. It wasn’t a plan Harry had thought he’d apply today, though. He was a little young to die, and he didn’t expect much more than that. All of them were too young to die, and Harry and Tracey went to Luna, tears in their eyes. Seeing her, though, brought a small smile on their face: Luna, contrarily to most victims of the life-taking curse, had a smile etched on her face.

“Are you sure you have to do it?” Tracey asked, a tremor in her voice – not at all due to her current condition.

“You know that I must. We can’t simply bury it, or he’d pierce through.”

She nodded sadly. “Try to come back.” she said in a small voice. “For us. For me.”

“I promise.” he replied, and the two of them shared a parting kiss. Both of them knew that he had promised to try, not to succeed, and the kiss ended with a salty wetness coming from both of them.

Tears.

Harry looked around, but only Goken was looking back. He nodded at his mentor and the man nodded back, respect flowing back and forth. The man acknowledged the sense of self-sacrifice and the plan wasn't far from that.

The Boy-Who-Lived straightened up and glared at the sphere in front of him.

A minute later, wings had sprouted from his back and he was airborne, guiding the sphere through Levitation – that wasn't a power he could safely apply to himself and a Dark Lord's prison, hence the wings.

And, once in the air, he guided the sphere upwards.

Upwards.

And upwards again.

An external observer would notice that there was nothing much that up in the air, and that their direction was the Sun itself. That external observer would be right.

Knowing that the Dark Lord was still in his prison due to the sphere's jerks left and right, Harry was guiding the sphere straight towards the surest way he knew to recycle particles. Or kill.

When he reached the limit of the breathable atmosphere, now sure to be out of the anti-Apparation ward Voldemort had cast on Goken's ground, Harry Apparated out, careful that he didn't lose control of the floating ball. For that, he had to keep his hands in the tangible reality, but it wasn't a problem.

For now.

Of course, travelling in space without proper garb wasn't a healthy trip, and Harry's hands were promptly frozen. He ignored the pain, though, knowing that whatever the damage, he could always heal it afterwards – he did even better than ignore the pain: he disconnected that particular circuit in his mind.

Applying his thoughts on travels through the wind-swept gaseous reality he was now in, he also used his Metamorphmagus powers to extend his wings as much as he could. It was of some help to counteract the solar wind, too, and provided a constant acceleration for as long as his wings grew. Eventually, with a wingspan of two miles and enough pectoral muscles to bring any dragon to shame, his initial speed had grown by two orders of magnitude.

Still, he was only travelling at one-thousandth of the speed of light, and it took him almost a week to reach his target. It allowed him to think about the imprisoned Dark Lord. It was fortunate that he had cast a spell on the bubble: anything else would have burst the burgeoning prison cell. Even walking through it. Now, the opaque sphere prevented spells from going through, and the imprisoned wizard from passing through. Even magically – otherwise, it would have been for naught.

When the winged wizard and the imprisoned Dark Lord finally entered the area where the Sun's gravity could be felt without external influence, they stopped. Were anyone able to represent the scene, it would have been breathtaking: Harry's large wings were beating softly to surf the solar wind, and his hands were out of the gaseous reality, half-frozen and half-burning because of the Sun's proximity; at the same time, the sphere keeping Voldemort captive was vibrating with malevolent power.

Knowing that the Dark Lord was resourceful, Harry decided to proceed quickly, but a hand on his shoulder stopped him. He tried to whirl around, but his wings got in the way and he only succeeded in turning his head. There, behind him, were his Nahual and another winged being whose presence he recognized almost immediately.

“Raphael! Quetzalcoatl! What are you doing here?”

“We are here to prevent an unnecessary sacrifice.” the archangel spoke softly.

“Going in the Sun with this... thing,” the Aztec god started, pointing at the alabaster-like sphere, “is not necessary.”

“I would not have you in me either. Especially as you are a Chosen.” a third voice spoke, and Harry had to blink. The Sun had disappeared, only to be replaced by a human-looking being whose hair and clothes seemed in flames.

“Tonatiuh.” he breathed, suddenly remembering the god who inadvertently gave him eyesight again, several years before.

“Yes, human.” the Sun god nodded.

Harry frowned. “Just how many gods are there? No offence, but I heard about several gods about the Sun already, not to mention the others aspects.”

“You would be right. We share it, simply.”

Harry looked pensive for a moment, before looking at the space around them. They were in a small village of precolumbian-looking dwellings, and he guessed that it was the gods' place of residence. The Aztec ones, that is. One of Genevieve's discussion came back to the forefront of his mind, and he addressed the gods again, waving at the houses. “Is that what the scientists call “Dark Matter”?”

Tonatiuh and Quetzalcoatl looked at each other before turning to him. “Actually, you would be right. But do not think you can tell the humans on Earth. They would lapidate you.”

Harry nodded, and Tonatiuh smiled, before looking at the alabaster prison. “Now, just give me the offending item and I will take care of it.”

Harry acquiesced, and, after the three immortals had disappeared, he Levitated the prison towards the Sun. The sphere started to vibrate even more, as though Voldemort was feeling the Sun's heat piercing his cell walls, and trying to escape it.

By now, Harry's hands were completely burned by the star's heat, but it still didn't register. He watched as the Dark Lord's last place of residence was buried in the sea of molten particles that was the Sun. And he kept looking long after the sphere had disappeared from view, waiting for something to happen.

And something happened.

As the alabaster-like sphere was being descended into the Sun core, the pressure and temperature that could be found at this place started to eat at the magically-made barrier. Before then, Voldemort had been trying spell after spell until the walls were so thick that he couldn't move anymore. When, unbeknownst to him, his prison cell was lowered into the Sun, he did feel a change in his surroundings. He raised his head, and, finding that his magical prison had changed somehow, he tried a couple spells to weaken the walls around him. Elated at his initial success, he continued until he reached the first cracks the molten particles had made in his prison. When he finally noticed the blinding and scorching matter oozing through, he understood that these cracks were due to an external action, he also knew that this sizzling matter would eventually reach his body.

Thinking that his prison had been dumped in an active volcano, he started to cast every shield he knew that could repel lava, while trying to Apparate at the same time. However, his prison existed in the gaseous reality as well, and he couldn't escape. His powerlessness reached another peak when he noticed that his shields weren't protecting him against the white matter filtering through.

The Dark Lord was powerless and afraid, because he knew he was going to die soon – and really dieing, this time. He screamed.

The pressure around the prison finally reached its critical amount, and said prison was completely crushed, Voldemort's last body with it. A bubble of magic-filled air was pushed to the outside by the star, much like a bubble would do in the ocean.

Harry smirked. It was as though the Sun had burp-

Suddenly, the three immortals were there again, with Tonatiuh a little green. "Sorry, I think I'll lie down for a while."

"It is done." Quetzalcoatl intoned when his friend disappeared. "This Dark Lord is no more."

"I'll heal your hands and your eyes, now." Raphael said, raising a hand to prevent Harry's interruption. "I know you can do it by yourself, but, with Voldemort gone, you don't need the powers that were lent to you anymore."

"How am I going to return on Earth?" Harry asked as his wings disappeared.

The winged serpentine god had been thoughtful during the exchange, and he spoke suddenly. "Do you want to see what is happening?"

Not actually knowing what his Nahual had in store, Harry acquiesced, and he suddenly found himself standing near him in what appeared to be a courtroom. A courtroom where a snake-like woman was being berated by a powerful-looking man with a thundering voice. A bearded man with lightning in his hands. A man next to whom the other pantheon Heads were sitting, nodding.

"The tribunal of the gods." Quetzalcoatl whispered. "It has seldom been used, but Wadjet went beyond the pale. Look!"

And, under Harry's eyes, a lightning burst from Zeus and struck the shadow of Voldemort that was standing next to Wadjet. The Dark Lord's image held for a tiny fraction of a second, before being torn to shreds. In his thundering voice, the head god spoke the sentence against the snake goddess, and several deities gasped.

"She's stripped of her goddess status." Quetzalcoatl breathed after a moment. Harry was thankful that he had someone to translate the rumbling words, because he had been unable to understand them at all – and, to be honest, a little frightened.

"What happened to Voldemort?" he asked.

The feathered snake-god didn't answer immediately. Only when the trial was at its end did he turn towards Harry. At the same time, the countryside changed and Harry found himself in a pasture near Hogwarts.

"His last Horcrux had been his snake, and that had been absorbed by Wadjet to sustain her." the rapidly fading god said. "With no links to his mortal shell, the gods were finally able to act on him. Since he liked splitting his soul so much, it had been decided that his would be split in as many parts as there are Hells, and to send them there."

"Ouch."

"Yes, ouch. Even if he succeeds in escaping some of them, he'd never be complete again. He will never return to life. Ever."

A pause.

Harry looked around. "It's finished, then?"

"Yes." his Nahual's voice came from all around him, and, when Harry looked, the feathered snake-god was gone.

A strange feeling remained, though. A feeling of incompleteness. Of frustration.

Harry frowned, before shaking his head and walking towards the castle looming in front of him. He had a Headmaster to see. Quetzalcoatl returned to his house in the Aztec pantheon, and he sat down, sighing.

"Why can't we do what we want?" he asked to the seemingly empty room. "Why can't I tell him what I want? I'm his Nahual, for My sake!"

"I know, my friend." Tonatiuh said from the entrance. "But he's human, and we can't direct them for too long. You know the penalty."

“There’s a way, though.” the snake god said softly. “We could elevate him.”

Wearing a thoughtful frown, Tonatiuh sat down next to his friend. “That hasn’t been made for so young a human, before, you know. You’re right, we could... but is it wise? You also know what would happen if his elevation fails.”

A long pause ensued. After several long minutes, Quetzalcoatl spoke again. “You’re right. It’s not wise.”

“Glad I could make you see the light, my friend.” the Sun god said, flashing a smile lighting the whole room.

The snake god smiled as well. “No need to do your tricks on me, my friend. “See the light”, indeed!”

The two of them parted ways afterwards, but Quetzalcoatl’s smile evaporated and he started to think about his human. “You are right, my friend.” he whispered to himself. “He’s too young, and it’s not wise... for the moment.”

He stayed thoughtful for a long time, watching possibilities as only gods could.

Hogwarts, Headmaster’s office...

Harry knocked and, upon receiving permission, entered the cluttered office. Dumbledore was there, standing next to his desk. The teenager opened his mouth to report about Voldemort’s fate when a sweet scent assailed him. A scent too sweet to be natural, and which surely belonged to a low-budget perfume or something like that.

He closed his mouth as his senses picked a presence in the high-backed armchair facing the Headmaster’s desk. A disturbing presence.

As the silence was beginning to stretch, the presence made itself known by mundane means.

“Hem, hem.”

It was a feminine voice, but so sweet that it reeked of falsity. Especially as it didn't hold with the mental image Harry had of the person: that of an enlarged toad. He refrained his urge to burst into laughter, gape in surprise, or flee in disgust, and only then did he look at Dumbledore in askance.

“It's good to see you, Harry.” the man said, before turning to the armchair occupant. “Harry just came back from an early education in the Colonies, and he's joining Hogwarts in fourth year.” he said. Harry understood, from the man's mental patterns, that the term "Colonies" had been used so that the interlocutor would understand that he spoke about America.

Harry huffed – internally, mind you – at the reminder that some wizards still lived in the nineteenth century's set of beliefs. Or the eighteenth, even.

Dumbledore wasn't done with his introductions, though. “And, Harry, this is your new Professor of Defence Against the Dark Arts... Madam Dolores Umbridge.”

“Miss Umbridge, Dumbledore!” the woman said with her saccharine voice. “And I'd rather you don't introduce me with my full name. We have to keep the students well-mannered, don't we?”

With visible difficulty, the armchair's occupant extracted herself from it before turning to see Harry. “I'm Professor Umbridge.” she said imperiously, before frowning. “What's your last name?” she demanded.

With difficulty, Harry swallowed his mirth at seeing that his mental image had been accurate. Without the clothes, it could have been a toad standing there. Although the mere thought of trying to imagine that woman sans clothes brought him back on earth. With a sick stomach.

“Potter.” he finally said, and the woman's eyes widened.

“Dumbledore!” she exclaimed, turning to the old man. “You found him! Why didn’t you say anything? The Department for Magical Education has to interview this prodig- I mean... It’s highly irregular to bring people after the first year. What with their wands, and-”

“I’m sure that, whatever you want to ask Mister Potter here,” the old man started to answer, “you can ask him directly. And, if you want additional data, I’m here to answer your questions.”

The woman studied him, and then did the same thing to Harry – who felt himself akin to an appetizing fly for the large toadie.

“No, no.” she finally decided. “That will be alright. For the moment. But I want his academic résumé on my desk soon.”

That said, she took a pinch of Floo powder and, barely acknowledging Harry and simply nodding to the Headmaster, she left for the Ministry.

“That... toad? is going to teach us Defence?” Harry asked as soon as the Floo was empty again.

“Now, now, Harry. Dolores will be your teacher this year, but I’m sure someone else will take the job next year. What with Voldemort’s curse and all...”

“This curse is as much in the mind of people around the place as it is real. And it isn’t real anymore, so you ought to think differently from now on.”

“What do you mean, my dear boy?”

Harry sighed. “First, drop the “dear boy” when we’re alone. I just spent a year teaching, for Merlin’s sake! And what I meant is just that: if you hadn’t thrown me as a fourth year student, I could have continued teaching. Actually, as soon as I have a Time Turner again, I’ll be able to do both.”

“What did you mean about the curse, though?” Dumbledore asked, undeterred.

“That’s today’s good news: in the case Voldemort’s curse was real, it shouldn’t exist anymore.” Harry said, and he paused for effect. “Voldemort is dead.”

Dumbledore had been standing, but the announcement took the wind out of him, and he sat heavily... where he was. That is, on the side of his desk. On the floor.

“Ouch!” Harry winced in sympathy, before smirking. “If I knew what this sentence would do to you, I’d have asked for a duel before.”

“You would have won, probably.” the man said, slowly getting to his feet and rubbing his sore bottom. “I’m not as springy as I was before.” A pause. “Did you just say that Voldemort is dead? Really dead?”

“I personally witnessed the divine tribunal where he met his demise.” Harry said, before wincing. “I wouldn’t wish his fate to anyone. Except him, that is.”

“Were you injured? Did you come here right afterwards? Were there casualties? Are you-”

“I’m fine!” Harry exclaimed, interrupting the aged wizards’ questions. He paused, then. “But Luna died, protecting me and the others.” Another pause. “And, as for the “when”, it just happened, but I don’t know what day we are. It took me some time to bring him to the Sun.”

“You brought him... to the Sun?” Dumbledore asked, and he seemed ready to fall backwards again. Harry made a move to take his wand, but he didn’t cast a spell. The first reason was because Dumbledore had stabilized himself, and the second was because he simply didn’t have a wand ready – since he hadn’t been able to use wand magic in the final battle, he simply hadn’t prepared his wand. Frowning, he decided that he’d test his ability in wand magic at the earliest opportunity.

“Yes, I did.” he said simply. “Met Raphael, too. He healed my eyes and hands. They were burnt by the Sun. My hands, I mean.”

“I guess that this answers the Prophecy, then: he died by your hand.” Dumbledore mused, before moving to his seat behind the desk and sitting down with a bashful smile. “I’m just getting ready for your other surprises.” he answered Harry’s silent question.

“I don’t have other news, Headmaster. I ought to leave, now. Tracey must be on edge... When we designed the plan, I was to take Voldemort with me into the Sun.”

“Why? And what changed?”

“To be sure that he’d go there. Someone said that it wasn’t useful to get too near, though. The Sun is like a large planet, and it drags any solid object towards itself.”

Dumbledore thought about it for a moment, before nodding. “I guess I’ll have to inform the press, now. There were several disturbed articles over Voldemort’s reappearance in Diagon Alley, last week.”

“I heard about it.” Harry said, hanging his head in shame. “I should have been there. I should-”

“You have done your maximum, Harry.” Dumbledore interrupted him. “Of course, it’s difficult to have had casualties that day, but, thanks to you, he’s gone, now, and we won’t have that sort of things anymore.”

“I hope so, Albus.” Harry replied moodily. “I hope so.”

With a parting nod, he disappeared and tore through space – and magical wards – to head towards Japan.

His friends were at his family’s apartment, where his room had been enlarged into a dorm of sorts. They were currently playing quiet games or looking at the fireplace in silence.

Tracey was the first to feel him and she jumped to her feet. "He's alive!" she shouted, mere seconds before he appeared with an almighty crack – he hadn't slowed down before exiting the gaseous reality.

"Greetings!" he called with a wide smile. Half a second later, he was engulfed in a massive hug, quickly completed when his family, attracted by the sound of his Apparation, entered the room and noticed that he was there.

After he assured them that the big-bad-guy was gone and done with, the whole group spent the next couple of days relaxing peacefully before the upcoming start-of-term. They also told him that, using a portkey created by Tracey, they had sent the dozen unconscious Death Eaters to Diagon Alley, calculating the time and place so that they'd appear on the steps to Gringotts in the middle of the day. Needless to say, that had been first page material, and the dark wizards' trial wasn't finished yet.

Tracey also showed him a wall poster on which each person in the group had contributed. It was titled "Peace", and it showed articles from the Daily Prophet about the capture of the Death Eaters suspected of the attack on Diagon Alley's two week before, but also headlines from Muggles newspapers. These included the announcements about the creation of diplomatic relations between the Vatican and Israel, the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan, and the ongoing discussions about the imminent cessation of military operations of the Irish Republican Army. And a couple of pictures from Woodstock'94.

Soon enough, it was time to return to England – so that they could buy whatever they needed for the school year and that they hadn't purchased already – and to pack their trunks.

The first of September was a Thursday, this year, and, for the first time, Harry Potter was to take the Hogwarts Express as himself. Umbridge hadn't been discreet about it, though, and several announcements had been published in the Daily Prophet already. Arriving through the gaseous reality, though, Harry and his friends saw the crowd of reporters around the barrier, and they smiled before boarding the opposite side of the train.

“Blimey!” Ron said after they had found a compartment for their whole group. “They were really plentiful.”

“And packed, too.” Hermione frowned. “I hope the new students won’t be disturbed by this.”

“I hope that won’t cause a disturbance on the Muggle side, too.” Susan added, and Ginny nodded.

A pause ensued, after which Harry stood up and went to the door.

“Where are you going?” Tracey asked.

Harry’s eyes were twinkling as he looked back. “I’m going to play a little.”

“Play?” Fred asked.

“Without us?” George added.

Harry looked at them, smirking. “Ready for a little bout of hide-and-seek, gentlemen?”

The twin terrors nodded frantically, and Harry turned towards Tracey, wanting to ask her to transfigure them somewhat. But the girl was already up, her wand drawn. Harry smiled, and, when the Weasley twins finally looked more like two thirds of identical Potter triplets, he kissed her.

“Can we kiss her too?” Fred and George asked, earning a glare from the real Harry Potter.

The three troublemakers Apparated out, and, soon afterwards, the remaining students suddenly heard cries of “He’s here!” and “Mister Potter, a question, please.”

The three teenagers kept the reporters on a merry chase until even after the Express had started moving, and they reappeared next to their friends, their breath short and tears of laughter in their eyes. Needless to say, their friends were laughing too, and Hermione even produced a few wizarding photographs – taken with Harry's salamander-powered camera – of the crowd of grown men and women chasing an elusive Harry Potter in a manner worthy of the Benny Hill show.

The Sorting ceremony and the following Feast went without a hitch. Harry had a brief discussion with the Hat, and the magical piece of garment found that his most recent actions – especially regarding Voldemort – were more courageous than thought-out, ambitious, or easy-going.

That's why Harry Potter found himself at the Gryffindor table, enjoying the playful banter of the Weasley twins from a close location. Tracey was a tad crestfallen, but he mentally assured her that he'd be with her as often as he could – and he sent her an image of him Apparating into her bed, image that made both of them blush, actually.

The classes started soon, and Harry rediscovered the student side and its ups and downs. On one hand, he had much more free time, but, on the other hand, he also had homework to do. And, the fact that he knew the teachers by their given names didn't help.

Potions with Slughorn proved to be much more interesting than with Snape, even if, contrarily to the Death Eater, the man always expected him to pass with flying colours. Harry knew that it would yield a higher degree of disappointment should he fail something.

For the moment, though, he took advantage of his previous Apprenticeship with Flamel to brew perfect potions in record time, and he used the time left to ask details about the potion itself. Some would see it as sucking up to the teacher, but Harry asked pointed questions about the ingredients and the brewing method, as well as the potion's uses.

Those who had finished as well and who took down Slughorn's answers eventually got better marks on the following essays, and, as

soon as they realized that fact, most students would hurry to write down the question-and-answers session that Harry enacted at the end of each Potion period. Harry's friends started to do the same in their own classes, too, and, after a few months, Slughorn took upon himself to explain those things without prompting, something which would prove useful for the global grade in Potion at Hogwarts, and which would yield better grades in the future OWLs and NEWTs.

Harry had no problem adapting to the fourth year workload... except a few classes.

The first was Charms. Still caught in the after-effects of the anti-Horcruxes ritual, he simply couldn't cast a spell. Any spell. He got points for the essays and the theory part, but couldn't get the practical part done, something that annoyed Flitwick mightily. However, after being asked to stay after class for an explanation, Harry told his diminutive teacher that he suffered from some magical ailment and that Dumbledore could testify for this. After checking with the Headmaster, Flitwick stopped asking Harry to try the spell every five minutes.

He had the same problem with Transfiguration, but McGonagall knew who he was and what he had done, and it was easier to explain the problem of the ritual's side-effects. Still, he told her that he had in-depth experience with Transfiguration in each of the important fields – self, human, animal, architecture, and temporary. After testing his knowledge of the field and his Animagus transformation, she found out that the curriculum simply didn't fit him. She accepted that he'd be excused from the class, with the provisions that, first, he'd use the time for academic subjects and not practical jokes, and, second, that he'd tell her as soon as he could practise again so that she could test that part too.

It was for the better, though, because he could now focus on a couple of courses he hadn't taken before but that he knew could be interesting: Arithmancy and Ancient Runes. Between the two of them, these classes covered the fundamentals of the Theory of Magic, and that was useful to anyone wanting to understand the magical world better. However, he hadn't taken them in third year like regular

people did, and he had to study the previous year's curriculum with his friends for some time before he could understand this year's.

All in all, the only classes he didn't take were Divination and Astronomy – despite the fact that he wanted to meet the Chinese teacher "again". In Care of the Magical Creatures, he liked to be surprised by the creatures Hagrid brought to class, and they were always interesting to study for future use – as Patronus and Animagus shapes, for instance; or, and Merlin help him if that thought was repeated to Hagrid, as Potion ingredients.

Raphael might have taken his Metamorphmagus power away, but Harry was still able to reshape himself as an animal – as several animals. He was also able to act on his mind and others' as before; he was still able to ignore pain, for instance. He was "just" unable to morph himself as another human or heal himself anymore.

He discovered it the painful way when, in a crowd movement, he was pushed down the stairs. "It's nothing." he thought, holding his arm forward to break his fall at the next landing. When he couldn't repair his broken arm by himself, it finally brought to his mind that he would have to be careful with his body, now. And he also remembered all the stances and evasion techniques he had learnt with Goken. From then on, he wasn't going to capitalize on his self-healing power.

The only course he actively disliked was the one he had taught the year before: Defence Against the Dark Arts had become a caricature of what the course normally entailed. Not only was Dolores Umbridge a sweet-tongued backstabbing toad-like creature not teaching anything except reading Ministry-approved plain vanilla textbooks, she also made every attempt she could to augment her power over the school.

It was kept under wraps, though, and Harry didn't see anything wrong at first. The woman was a failure at teaching, but, as she wasn't the first in this case, Harry didn't see the need to act. Yet. Nevertheless, the students who had been in the fighting clubs were starting to speak openly about restarting them. Needless to say, that reached Umbridge's ears quickly.

Two weeks into September, she had succeeded in getting her previous employers – the Department of Magical Education – to write a decree forbidding the students to associate in clubs not registered and accepted by the Ministry. And, strangely, no form was issued for students to register their clubs. Even when they wrote a registration request on a blank parchment, it was rejected without explanation.

Since Harry's friends knew about his powers, they pressed him to recreate the fighting clubs, and Harry agreed.

That's why, a mere week after the dissolution of the other clubs, Harry, his closest friends, and a small group of students congregated in the Room of Requirements.

And Harry spoke thusly. "Welcome to the Fight Club. There are very few rules to follow, but they are very important."

In the religious silence that ensued, he continued. "The first rule of the Fight Club is... you don't talk about Fight Club." A pause. "The second rule is... you don't talk about Fight Club."

That surprised the listeners, but they agreed that it was necessary so that Umbridge wouldn't overhear things and discover the club. Unbeknownst to them, the fact that the sentence was repeated allowed Harry to send a mental impulsion towards them, much like the mind viruses he had performed before, reinforcing the need not to speak about the Fight Club. Ever. Harry continued to enunciate the rules, finishing with "The last rule of the Fight Club is... if you're new to the Fight Club, you fight tonight!"

Most of the students besides Harry's friends were older students and influential in their own Houses, and a couple of them smirked, thinking that they would get the upper hand on any upstart teenager. Even one called Harry Potter. That evening, they all returned to their dorms without a bruise, but it was only because Hermione and Tracey were accomplished in superficial healing charms.

Soon after this, Umbridge had also succeeded in issuing another decree forcing teachers to be inspected by an "independent" party. It was no surprise when, a mere week after that, she was appointed as

said "independent" inspector. When she succeeded in getting Hagrid suspended, though, Harry decided that passive resistance wasn't enough, and he sought the woman out.

She started having freak accidents in empty corridors, but that didn't deter her, and, using these accidents as a pretext, she pushed for more decrees to be issued, limiting the freedom of teachers and students alike.

It reached the breaking point when, in the midst of the Halloween feast, a company of Aurors barged in the Great Hall.

"Dumbledore!" the one in charge bellowed. "You are under arrest for encouraging violence in the school, among other things."

The Headmaster stood slowly. "What other things?" he asked.

The Auror took a parchment from his pocket and started to read it – with difficulty. "Consorting with You-Know-Who to get teachers you don't like killed. Favours population unrest by accepting students fighting together. Lack of information to the general public about your failures. Exaggerated tolerance to half-breeds. And showing a bad example to the younger generations by consuming too many candies."

At the last charge, several students started to laugh, but they quieted quickly when the Aurors got their wands out and pointed at them.

"Who accuses me?" the Headmaster asked. "And since when does tolerance to other creatures constitute a crime? You ought to know it's one of the topics of the Order of Merlin."

"Don't play word games with us, Dumbledore." the Auror in command huffed, his wand raised as well.

The Headmaster looked around. "Are you people ready to curse innocent children?" he asked in a whisper, before rising at his full height. "You dare to come in my school and threaten me and my charges? ARE YOU THAT MAD?"

Harry had to concede it to the old man: even in his old age, the Headmaster had kept his charisma intact. The aura of power shown by the sudden wind in the room was enough to make anyone have second thoughts.

Well... almost anyone.

Reinforced in his belief that the Headmaster was dangerous and to be apprehended rapidly, the head Auror started to incant, only to be Silenced by a mere gesture from the Headmaster. "This is my school, gentlemen. These are my charges. With no accuser and no proof, your accusations don't stand by themselves. As Head of the Wizengamot, I will file a formal inquiry on your procedures. Now, as Headmaster of this venerable institution of learning you have come to desecrate with your stupidity, I order you... OUT!"

From the group of Aurors, there were a few who seemed to have had second thoughts the moment they had entered the room. The others had been cut in the same cloth their leader was made of, though, and they opened their mouth to object... only to find themselves on a barren island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

Cassie didn't take lightly on people wanting to harm her inhabitants. With the Headmaster's injunction, she had coupled her power with his to Banish the offenders far away.

"Now that this idle threat has been waved away..." Dumbledore said slowly, before turning to Umbridge.

Umbridge, whose method of education weren't on par with her predecessors.

Umbridge, who had worked so hard to restrain the liberties of people in Hogwarts.

Umbridge, who had been barely hiding her smug expression when the Aurors had entered the room.

“...I’ll ask my accuser to meet me in my office.” the Headmaster said, looking at her in the eyes.

“Why?” she blurted in a suddenly not-so-sweet voice, before gulping and returning to her usual fake sweetness. “I mean... why do you look at me? You did just guess that, as a Ministry employee, I’m your accuser, didn’t you?”

“No.”

“Good! Because-”

“No, I didn’t guess.” A pause, and everyone was certain that, if Umbridge had chosen to follow Dumbledore into his office, the scolding she was about to receive would have been private.

“Dolores Umbridge, as Headmaster of Hogwarts, I have to remind you of several clauses in your Professorship contract, clauses you have overlooked in your hurry to throw this place in disarray. From the moment you signed, you were an employee of Hogwarts, not the Ministry. When you acted in such a way as to discourage the students and professors in place, I waited to see if you would see the light. But you didn’t.” A pause followed, and several persons shivered. The Headmaster had always been kind to everyone, and nobody wanted to be in Umbridge’s place in the future. Ever.

“Because you breached your contract, you are hereby stripped of every title, advantage, and monies you could have gained from the moment you entered this institution.”

“You can’t!” blurted the woman. “There’s no one willing to teach Defence, with the curse and all...”

“You are wrong, but also in no position to negotiate. Your decrees are also null and void: never had the Department of Magical Education a say about anything going on inside Hogwarts.”

“But... they are from the Ministry! You can’t just-”

“I can, and I am doing it right now. I have been patient with you, but you went too far. Know that the school will file a formal complaint about you and your behaviour. Several students came to me already with distressing information about threats you made. Others came to tell me of disturbing offers you made to them.”

“Liars! All of them! I have-”

“I’m sure you have blackmail material on each of them, Umbridge.” the man said, his voice cold as ice. “That’s why I can’t allow you to get them. Expelliarmus! Now... consider the place you’ll be in as an antechamber to Azkaban. OUT!” Dumbledore finished, and the toad woman disappeared with a crack, only to find herself in another deserted island, this one closer to the Antarctic continent.

The cheer that shook the Great Hall was the largest and happiest that the school had ever seen. Especially as all the Houses participated, joined by several teachers.

When the cheer abated, a full minute later, the Headmaster looked around with an expression not far from shame.

“I’m sorry to have taken so long to act. My attempts at curtailing her were answered positively but always denied in practice. Those of you who feel slighted by this can file a protest against the school. I’m-”

“We got what we wanted!” someone shouted from the crowd.

“And she got what she deserved!” someone else concurred.

The students began to clap and Dumbledore thanked them before sitting down. With the toad gone, everyone was looking forward to a brighter future.

And most of the students were discussing about their replacement teacher.

A bit later, in the Headmaster’s office...

The last rays of the setting Sun were passing through the ornate window, giving the disordered room an impression of fire-induced warmth. That impression was augmented by the flames glowing merrily in the flue, and by the phoenix chirping next to it. The elderly wizard who sat behind the desk was listening to his avian familiar's song, when the feeling of someone passing the stone guardian downstairs brought his attention back to mundane matters. Fawkes stopped singing a couple seconds later, and flew back onto his perch.

The newcomer reached the door and knocked three times in rapid succession. In his usual manner, the office's current owner concentrated for a brief second, only to feel nothingness beyond the door. Interrupting the attempt, he sighed and spoke.

"Enter, Harry."

The boy entered, a smile on his face. "Why don't you put a one-way mirror on the doorframe, Headmaster?"

"A what?"

"It's a kind of mirror the Muggles have devised: one side is a mirror while the other is simply a pane of glass. That would relieve you of the reflex of using Legilimency on any visitor."

"I imagine that it would do, yes." the old man nodded pensively, before straightening up on his seat and taking his wand out. A complicated wave later, a chintz armchair had appeared in front of his desk. "But I didn't ask you to come here to speak about that."

Harry shrugged, before sitting down. "I guessed so. Let me elaborate. You just fired Umbridge, who was worse to the course and the whole school than leaving the students do independent study, and you want to ask me to retake the course. Right?"

"Yes, but you aren't the only one I wanted to ask." Dumbledore said before sitting back. "I just did because I know you liked it, last year."

“I did, yes, but I won’t learn anything else besides Defence, that way, and I recently grew attached to a few courses highlighting magical theory.”

“So I heard, Harry. So I heard. And I’m glad you did so. Is it a firm "no", then?”

“Yes. Sorry, Albus, but not only would it cause a problem if I use a Time-Turner to teach myself, I also can’t act as anyone else for a while.”

“What do you mean?”

“When I brought Voldemort to his demise, a... celestial being healed my eyes and hands – my eyes are normal, now. But he also removed my Metamorphmagus ability. I won’t be able to transform into anyone for some time.”

“He intends to give it back, you mean?”

“No. Just that I’ll be able to apply Transfiguration on myself, but not now. Remember Hufflepuff’s cup? The ritual?”

“Oh... Oh! Right. Sorry about pushing you into that, my boy.”

“It’s alright.”

The two of them fell into a comfortable silent for a few seconds, before Harry broke it. “So... who will it be? Who are the candidates?”

Dumbledore looked up, a twinkle on his eye – and Harry groaned. “You’ll see when the time will be right, Harry. In the meantime, you can continue your meetings.”

“How do you know?” asked Harry, pausing mid-move as he was standing up – an awkward position, and he swiftly corrected it by finishing his intended move.

“If you’d like to let an old man keep a few secrets, my boy. You already know more than your classmates. Much more, I’d say.”

“Some of which I’d like not to have to know.” Harry grumbled, before smiling brightly. “Alright. We’ll continue. Your teachers will have to be good, if they want to reach the students’ level.”

“Don’t fear.” the Headmaster was smiling as well, his eyes glinting in their usual way when he was telling a good joke. “They will be.”

Harry left the old man’s office with more questions in his head than when he entered it.

The fact that Umbridge was gone and that the Ministry was curtly reminded that their nose had nothing to do in Hogwarts’ business caused an unexpected problem. One that, upon discovering it, Harry would go alone in the Room of Requirements to vent his fury.

His mail had been screened.

For as long as he had lived, mail addressed to "Harry Potter" had gone through a special cell of the Department of Mysteries, and the Unspeakables working there had simply considered part of their job to remove any fan or hate mail from the Boy-Who-Lived’s correspondence.

It took a couple of weeks for him to understand the root of the problem, though.

In the meantime, he had to beat his way through an average twenty owls a day, most of them containing inane questions or declarations. He was rather glad that, one morning, a pair of mischievous and red-haired twins offered their help, quickly joined by their little sister. Their help would consist of writing equally inane replies with a mild prank, signed "the Harry Potter mail-screening committee" or some equally pompous title.

During his first weeks as a true celebrity – Hogwarts students had long since returned to normalcy around him: almost as soon as they

realised that he had been included in the group of fighters that had successfully fought their Defence teacher, the year before – Harry was treated to a welcome sight, and a shock. Together.

He came to the Great Hall one morning, a bit late for breakfast, only to skid to a halt at the entrance when he noticed the people in the room, and the end of the Headmaster's speech about them.

“...and, coming from America, let me present you Mr and Mrs Smith, your new Professors in Defence Against the Dark Arts.”

Harry blinked. Of course, he knew that the two of them were married – they had eloped in Las Vegas, one day when they were completely smashed – but he hadn't known his family name.

Josh and Allison, surfers to the core, were going to teach Defence!

He did the first thing that crossed his mind: he laughed.

That threw a cold atmosphere in the hall, as many students thought he was insulting the two new teachers. Following that idea, said teachers walked toward him and raised their wand.

“Care to explain your hilarity, Mister Potter?” Josh said in a stern voice. It was so out of character that it sent Harry into more gales of laughter.

“You want a formal duel, Mister Potter?” Allison asked, and Harry was tempted to say yes, but he remembered that he couldn't use his wand yet. And he didn't want to humiliate his friends: to be honest, the last time he checked, their power level was lower than his. They might know a few tricks he didn't, but the time for conflict wasn't now.

His mind perceiving that their stern faces was just a temporary facade, Harry smiled widely and jumped to hug them both. “It's good to see you guys!” he said, easing the tension around them.

When the two patted his back as well, the students understood that most of it had been an act – well, except Harry's late entrance – and

they returned to their meal. Most of them thought that the two Americans were teachers or possibly older students from where Harry had been schooled while in America. The few of them in the know smirked to each other.

Defence was going to be fun.

Despite some occurrences in the fighting clubs, the year passed uneventfully until Easter came around. The following Hogsmeade weekend started peacefully, only to be interrupted when someone cast Voldemort's Dark Mark in the sky.

Harry had been having a light meal with Tracey at the Hog's Head when screams reached their ears. Hurrying outside and noticing a crowd in front of the Three Broomsticks, they ran there, only to be treated with a grizzly sight.

Susan was there.

Dead.

Harry's blood began to boil, and he looked around with a searching eye, trying to discern a guilty face in the crowd. He found several guilty faces, but quickly switched to search guilty minds. The guilty faces belonged to Susan's dorm mates who hadn't kept track of their friend, hence the guilt.

Not finding any actual culprit right there, Harry knelt next to his friends, tears beginning to make his vision swim. However, his sadness morphed into an even greater fury than earlier when he noticed that the blanket over Susan's body had been put there by a villager. To hide something.

His friend had been tortured. And perhaps sexually molested, too, given her current state of clothing.

Among the people who had noticed her at first, there were some students still ill from the bloody vision.

Harry felt a hand on his shoulder and it took all his self-control not to blast its owner to smithereens.

“Harry, my boy... I’m sorry. But, please, rein your anger.”

Harry stood up, his head full of revenge. “Albus.” he said, his voice shaking. “Someone signed his own death warrant, today.”

“Harry... you can’t just-”

“I want the Time Turner.” Harry stated, his hand extended.

“I can’t give it to you like that, Harry. You kno-”

“BULLSHIT!” the boy yelled, and several onlookers took a step backwards. After a couple of calming breaths, Harry spoke again. This time, his voice wasn’t shaking anymore, but it had a frozen edge to it. “You want me to say please? Alright.” A pause. “Can I have the Time Turner, please? I know you have it.”

The Headmaster looked into Harry’s eyes, and the boy drew him in his mind, where the fire of his anger was threatening to burn everything if it didn’t find an outlet rapidly. He also saw that, should he say no, the boy would tear through his office to find the artefact. His shoulders slumped. “Very well.”

Harry said nothing and grabbed the old man’s shoulder. An instant later, they were gone.

Tracey and Hermione, both in tears about what had happened to their friend and what Harry was going to do, knelt next to Susan’s prone form and transfigured some clothes on her before Levitating her and bringing her to the Hospital wing.

“Please, Harry.” Dumbledore said as he was giving the magical artefact to his protégé. “Try to take them alive.”

Harry paused, before nodding. On a subconscious level, he knew that he shouldn’t go berserk, or he might become Dark later in his life. However, Susan had been the most easy-going of his circle of friends, and no one had the right to take her life.

As Harry was disappearing, taken by the vortex sending him to the past, the Headmaster realized that Harry hadn't vowed not to kill. He hadn't asked for it, though. Albus Dumbledore had known, from the instant he noticed Harry shaking in fury next to his dead friend, that Harry Potter was going to become Henry Evans for a few hours: the fearless killer.

Harry found himself back in time. He knew he couldn't go further than 24 hours in his original timeline, but he couldn't remember seeing Susan in the past day, and he had turned the small hourglass the maximum number of turns allowed.

Perhaps, if he found Susan, she could stay alive.

After all, he had seen only a corpse. If he found her, he could transfigure a corpse from some random material and leave it in Hogsmeade for the timeline not to be disturbed.

If he found her.

Despite using the Point Me spell copiously, it always yielded naught. Owls sent after her turned around in vain. And Cassie confirmed that she wasn't in Hogwarts already. He tried contacting her mentally, flying frantically over several continents, but she didn't answer.

It left few options to Harry: the first was to backtrack the path of the person who dropped her, using the Time Turner to refresh the trail; the second was to trace them after they left the scene, and interrogate them.

Not having much to do, he stayed in the gaseous reality, waiting for his target to appear in Hogsmeade. When it was close to the time he had first heard the commotion, he realized that, in order to appear quickly and do their grizzly business, the person must have Apparated, or used a portkey.

He was half-true.

When he noticed Susan appearing, alone, and a magical trinket flying and morphing into a Dark Mark, he knew he had been fooled.

Well, as the saying goes: fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.

Harry followed the quickly disappearing portkey trail – with his skill, those were easy to follow, when going in the same direction – and, when the trail had disappeared completely, he turned back time and repeated the move.

And, eventually, he found the starting point: a cold chamber, in a dilapidated restaurant in the outskirts of an Australian town.

And he noticed something: nobody had done anything for Susan to be portkeyed away.

It had been a timed portkey!

Angrily, he turned the hourglass as far as it would go, only to find the same grizzly scene in front of his eyes.

And he slumped against the cold walls, defeated.

He could feel the muggle-repelling wards around him. There was no chance for him to link the owner of this place to his friend's murderer.

He also realized something: Susan's assassination must have taken him into account at some point. For the killers to think about the fact that he could have access to a Time Turner...

His fury abated somewhat, he went to Susan's corpse and kissed her cheeks tenderly. "Goodbye, my friend. My sister. My love. May you find peace, wherever you are." A pause. "May the gods have mercy on those who did that to you. Because, if I find them... when I find them, I will not."

Harry left her, and, using the Time Turner as much as he could and staying hidden in the gaseous reality, he scanned the minds of all the students and teachers at Hogwarts. One after the other. Perhaps one of them remembered something? Even something seemingly unrelated to the tragedy.

When the Time Turner started to show signs of wear – it was getting uncomfortably hot – Harry stopped using it and finished trying to build the puzzle that was life at Hogwarts these last 48 hours. And, even with Cassie's help, there wasn't much that could be done.

He was ready to return to the Headmaster's office, when a burst of images from Cassie came to his mind. It was showing Susan and Cedric Diggory having a friendly talk as they walked out of the castle, 36 or so hours ago. There wasn't much to it, though: Susan and Cedric were both in Hufflepuff, where most of the students were friendly and easy-going.

The thing was, Harry didn't have the same memories from Cedric's last scan.

His blood flowing faster with adrenaline, Harry demanded Cedric's location from Cassie and hurried there. Had the older boy been acting under Imperious? Had he been Obliviated? In Harry's mind, other possibilities were being created and discarded as he neared Hufflepuff's dorms – after going back in time so many times, it was still early morning on that fateful day.

When he finally reached the boy, he closely examined his memories, but nothing highlighted the use of the mind-controlling curse or the obliviation curse on him. Older memories were useless to Harry, because the eventual events that could have been important to him would have been inconsequential for the older boy and accordingly removed from his long-term memory. Something like a hair – a necessary component for the Polyjuice potion – being taken from him while walking in a crowd of students, for instance, wouldn't have been memorized.

Harry was ready to browse the minds of the students again, to see if anyone had seen Cedric or a possible Polyjuiced impostor, but his Time Turner had been used too much already: trying to touch it would yield burns, and Harry knew he shouldn't push his luck.

So, after browsing several minds until it was past midday, he returned to Dumbledore's office.

“My boy!” the man exclaimed, taking in his appearance.

His clothes were ragged, he had bags under his blood-shot eyes, and his hands were trembling. On top of that, he flinched constantly, auguring a massive headache – a foreseeable consequence of browsing so many minds so rapidly. Besides his ragged appearance, Harry was holding the Time Turner by its chain, the artefact itself being too hot to take a hold of it. Comparing with what he knew, the old man quickly reached a conclusion.

“How much time were you gone?” he asked. “And did you sleep at all?” He frowned. “Were you successful?”

“I... No.” Harry croaked. “24 hours is too short. I need to speak to Tracey... headache.” he stammered, before disappearing, leaving the Headmaster with a thoroughly-used artefact which normal use was already restricted by the Unspeakables.

After placing the Time Turner in a heat-resistant container which he locked in a drawer, Dumbledore Flooed his friend in the Department of Mysteries. Perhaps he could find a way for his charge to succeed in his endeavours. And, perhaps, he could find a way for Harry not to become Dark at the same time.

Harry went to his bed like an automaton, while his mind reached Tracey’s, and, before falling from sleep deprivation, he sent her a quick burst of memory relating his findings regarding Susan.

As soon as he hit the pillow, though, ending his communication with Tracey, someone opened the door to the Hospital Wing and looked inside, his silhouette cut by the bright light backdrop. When he found Tracey, the intruder strode towards her, wearing a frown, and several people gasped. It was another version of Harry Potter, slightly taller but thinner, with long black hair held in a ponytail.

“Tracey!” he exclaimed. “I just heard that Susan was murdered. Tell me it’s not true!”

Blake Lenoir was back. And he was mightily pissed.

After being told the story and Harry's findings, Blake went to look at Susan for the last time, before heading to the Headmaster's office. On his way, he remembered where he was and took care of morphing his features so that he'd look like Harry – he hadn't been deprived of Metamorphmagus powers; given the people he was with when Harry had killed Voldemort, it would have ended his life, too.

Blake Lenoir wasn't a kind and gentle person. He was rich, and always sought new experiences to escape boredom. He had already tried several drugs, but he never liked the landing and finally settled on smoking cigarettes – if it killed you, it did so slower than cocaine, especially when you were tripping in the middle of the inter-state at rush hour.

He had also tried extreme sports, and gained professional recognition in several of them. He was also the one behind a brand of sport articles for the magical people. Roller-blades with wheels stored inside the shoe when not in use, self-shrinkable surf boards and skis... you name it.

The Headmaster wasn't there, and Blake asked the first person he laid his eyes upon: the portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black, former Headmaster, known adept of the Dark Arts, and great-great-something of Sirius Black. Needless to say, the man wasn't impressed to see the young student demand where the Headmaster had gone. Given his way of life, though, he was more impressed when said student threatened to burn his frame if he didn't comply. Still, there were protections on previous Headmasters' frames, and he laughed. His laughter stopped short when Blake Levitated to him and issued an intensely hot blue flame from Ravenclaw's ring. Whether it was the boy's power, the type of spell, or the fact that it was cast with the Founder's ring, the portrait started to scorch at the corner and its inhabitant quickly relented – even if he had another portrait to hide in, Phineas would rather stay where he could oversee Hogwarts, and, frankly, the information the boy demanded was less important than that.

Blake Flooed to the Department of Mysteries.

Once there, he "persuaded" the Unspeakable on duty that he had an appointment with Dumbledore, and he was led to him. And Paracelsus.

"Jolly goodness!" he exclaimed. "If it isn't the meeting of the dinosaurs!"

"Harry!" Dumbledore exclaimed, shocked of the boy's rashness.

"That's no Harry." Paracelsus said, frowning.

"Whatever." Blake waved the remark away. "What are you going to do to save Susan?"

"Susan is dead, my dear boy, and-"

"Don't call me dear boy ever again." Blake growled. "The last who did found his hands secured in his colon." A shocked pause. "Now," he continued, smiling as if nothing ugly had just been uttered, "I just saw a corpse that could have been transfigured from anything, and I want to know what you can do to send someone a week back in time. I think it should be enough."

When the old men didn't react, Blake waved his hand in front of them and chuckled at the lack of reaction he got from them. "Shit, I broke them. Harry'll have a fit."

"Enough!" Dumbledore exclaimed, trying to reassert his authority. "Who are you?"

"For the sake of simplicity, consider that I am Harry Potter." Blake said, waving his hand in the air. "Just another Harry, but the same. After all, it's not as if I had any other true identity."

"There's a way to know that for sure." Paracelsus said.

“Ding!” Blake exclaimed, mimicking the tapping on a bell. “We have a winner! Of course there’s a way. In the magical world, there’s a way for anything. So, what would it be? Wand signature? I’m afraid it’s not registered. Blood sample? Hmmm... that might work. But, as I don’t like my blood being thrown to places it doesn’t belong, you’ll have to do the test here.”

The two men were quite stunned by the youngling’s way of talking. They were rarely insulted or made fun of, nowadays. To say it was refreshing would be... wrong. They were simply confused. Paracelsus recovered first, though.

“Alright, young man. Give me your... hand.” the man finished just as Blake’s hand was shoved next to his face.

As the Head of the Department of Mysteries, and as certified Alchemist, Paracelsus knew blood and the tests that could be applied on it. A short time later, a sheet of parchment was displaying three words:

Harry James Potter.

“But... I just left Harry, and he was-”

“Tired? Dead on his feet? I know, Tracey told me.”

“Are you Harry from another time, perhaps?” Dumbledore asked warily. Time travel was always a sore subject among scholars.

“Or another dimension?” Paracelsus added, earning the glares from the two others – although it was for different reasons. Like any scholar, Dumbledore had his ideas about multiple dimensions, and he simply wasn’t agreeing on the concept. Blake, though...

“Stop reading those fanfictions, if you please.” he said sarcastically. “I’m here, from this world. It’s just that Harry and I... separated, at one point. But we are the same person.”

“You’re twins?” Dumbledore asked, trying to wrap his mind around the subject.

“If we were twins, I suppose I’d have another name, or I’d sue my parents.” Blake said. “But I allow you to think that we’re twins... just that we split nine years after our birth, not nine months before.” A pause. “But enough about me. The clock is ticking, and, despite my vast knowledge, I still don’t know the multiple wonders held in the Department of Mysteries. Is it possible to go back in time as far as seven days, or am I just wasting my time?”

“It is possible...” Paracelsus stated.

“Joy!” Blake exclaimed, jumping to his feet.

“...but I can’t allow someone as undisciplined as you go as far.” the old Alchemist deadpanned.

“Undisciplined? Me?” Blake asked, before bursting in laughter.

“What is so funny?” Dumbledore asked.

“What proof would you require to deny your own statement?” the boy asked Paracelsus, who frowned.

“We could ask for your school records, but, given your name, you’d have Harry’s... There is one way, though. Since you have your own mind, we can test it to see if you’re disciplined.”

“Go for it.” Blake simply said, sitting sideways on one of the chairs in the office.

The Head Unspeakable aimed his wand at Blake and spoke one word. “Legilimens.”

Needless to say, they were quickly convinced that he was proficient in Occlumency, and, since that discipline required... discipline, they reluctantly agreed to let him pass.

“Great!” the boy said, jumping to his feet. “So, when are we going... when?”

“How can we know if you succeeded?” Paracelsus asked.

Blake frowned, before a smile lightened his features. “If I’m successful, Susan should be in your office right now.” he said, looking at Dumbledore.

“And if you aren’t?” Paracelsus insisted.

He shrugged. “Then, it won’t matter, will it? I’m either dead because of events, or dead because I messed too much with the timeline.” A pause, and he smirked at the two gobsmacked elders. “See? I know what not to do. So, a week, then?”

“A week.” Paracelsus agreed, and he led his friend and the annoying boy to the Time Room, where numerous clocks were ticking. The man took one and fiddled with the hands for some time, before handing it to Blake. “Here. One week, and you’ll start at Hogsmeade. Just tap your wand here.”

“One last question.” Dumbledore intervened. “Do you know how to hide in Hogwarts? It wouldn’t do to have two Harry Potters there... or three...” he finished, frowning.

Blake smirked. “Harry and I have the same powers. You don’t remember seeing me last week?”

As Dumbledore was reflecting on the question, Blake pressed Ravenclaw’s ring where Paracelsus had indicated, and he disappeared. The clock stayed behind, though, and it was purely the old Unspeakable’s reflexes that saved it from a fall.

“I didn’t see him.” Dumbledore whispered. “But perhaps it was simply because I wasn’t seeing him.”
One week earlier...

Blake was happy as anyone could be. Using his knowledge of the events of the ongoing week, he was placing ridiculously high bets on outsiders and collecting an impressive fortune to go with his already impressive fortune.

When it was time to act, he headed back to England and, not only did he follow Susan like a shadow, but he also placed a few tracking spells on her, in case anything went wrong.

Given his way of life, Blake Lenoir could be distracted from his goal, from time to time. Especially when the goal was only following a girl. Sure, the girl was beautiful, and, to be honest, he could play Harry and get his affair done promptly. But he wouldn't do that to his alter ego or his friends.

When he crossed the Headmaster's path, though, he couldn't refrain from making himself known. In as much innocuous a manner he could, he appeared next to Dumbledore and started to discuss with him as if he was Harry. He just took care of placing an interjection here, a catch phrase there, so that the future Headmaster would be confused as hell.

It was just after doing that that he felt Susan's tracers telling him that she had left the castle.

Using expletives sailors would blush at, he hurried through space to find her, and immediately noticed Cedric and her walking towards Hagrid's hut. Towards the wards' edge.

An outbound portkey not sanctioned by the Headmaster would raise the alarm. Harry knew that, and, visibly, that "Cedric" did, too.

Blake hurried after them and succeeded in catching them just as the boy was activating his portkey.

Hijacking a travelling portkey was a good method to cross wards. Especially when you were, like Harry and Blake, able to release said portkey a second before it landed.

He found himself in the gaseous reality of an unknown place, held in place by an anti-Apparation field. Contrarily to Susan, who was surprised by the action, he had an advantage on the enemies: they didn't know he was there.

While Susan was Stunned, Blake Apparated his wand hand in and did the same with her aggressors. They were five. They all fell, one after the other.

It was something to kidnap an unsuspecting victim. It was a totally different mindset to fight an invisible enemy. Only one of the five thought to revive his friends, but their confusion led them to another Stunner in the face.

Blake wasn't fond of the Stunner. It was so... unimaginative. So boring. But, for his current purpose, it was what he needed.

Once they were all bound, he explored their mind, and noticed several things:

First, they were Death Eaters. Real ones, with a tattoo and all. They had been freed when enough money had changed hands, and had plotted in secret since then. They knew about Harry's friends and part of their role in the demise of their Lord.

Second, they hadn't been five to be freed, which meant that...

"Stupefy!"

Blake cursed his lack of precautions. He should have sealed the entrances, anything!

He still had a chance, though, and he took it immediately: the man whose mind he was browsing was an easy prey for him and he promptly took control of him, leaving his consciousness gagged and bound on the side of the consciousness building.

His host didn't felt natural to him, so he promptly revived himself as his assailant was freeing and reviving his bound comrades, and retook his place in his own mind. Once again, he Stunned and bound

the unsuspecting Death Eaters, but he took care of his situation before moving on: he closed the door and locked it magically.

He then went to revive Susan and that's when he noticed that the Death Eaters had had time to do more than Stunning her. Visibly, one had done so and one or two others had perfected some spells to divest a pretty girl from her clothes.

She was naked.

Practically so: she still had her shoes and socks.

The vision threatened to throw Blake's self-control through the window, but he reined his feelings – and his organs – and Transfigured clothing from some discarded material. Only then did he revive her.

Then, as he was disarming the Death Eaters, shrinking them, and storing them in one of those Unbreakable bottles Harry used before, he told her a quick version of the story. When she understood the danger they were in, her fighting instincts kicked in – replacing her shock at being braless in front of a boy she still liked very much – and she promptly Summoned her bow.

From the memories of the ones he had captured, Blake knew that there were six other Death Eaters in the manor. The gaseous reality felt solid as a block of glass, revealing the presence of an anti-Apparation field, and he resolved to take them the regular way. Disillusioning himself, he heard Susan doing the same and couldn't hold back a silent grin – that girl had some resources, after all. Perhaps she'd want to come with him in America, and they'd...

He quashed this thought. In the enemy's lair, it wasn't helpful.

Despite your abilities, though, there are wards that you simply can't see before you trip them. Blake re-learned that lesson the hard way, when a Bone Breaking curse hit his arm. Susan succeeded in taking one of the Death Eaters out of the equation, but the others promptly got themselves protected against her arrows. Even trying to throw ballista bolts – like Harry had done once – wasn't as successful, due

to the barrage of spells they were subjected to. They found themselves forced to retreat to a large room where a quiet sound could be heard, underlying the hurling of spells.

Water.

Wherever they were, the house had a room with a pool of sorts...

Susan found the light switch.

...or a marina.

In front of their eyes were three speedboats of the latest model, and they promptly boarded one.

“Do you know how to drive?” Susan asked fearfully, her wand trained on the door – the locking ward performed by Blake was being overcome by the Death Eaters and the door was white-hot and starting to melt.

“No! But it must be like a caaaaaaa...” The rest of the sentence got lost in the powerful growl from the boat’s engine as it started backwards. As though obeying the sound, a large door opened in the back wall, and, when Blake had tamed the boat, they headed to the river there.

Susan threw incendiary curses at the two remaining boats before Blake headed out, evading the curse beams from the five remaining Death Eaters.

The incendiary curses were promptly put out, though, and the enemies boarded the two boats and hurried after the fleeing teens.

Not knowing about the "mission" the six other Death Eaters had wanted to do, they didn’t know about the teens themselves. They had initially thought that they were young burglars, and they had thought they would frighten them easily. When one of them had been downed with an arrow, though, things had gotten more serious.

Now, they were intending to kill them on sight.

That's why they hurried after the speeding boat. However, with the boats' speed, they couldn't take aim and cast Killing Curses.

The three ships practically flew towards the city nearby, but, perhaps because they had a greater skill driving them, the two teams of Death Eaters reached their prey quickly...

...only to find it empty, the controls stuck into "full-speed ahead" mode.

And, then, a shower of Stunners fell on them from the sky.

The five Death Eaters hadn't known that the two teens could Apparate as soon as they were out of the wards surrounding the house. They were quite young, after all; not old enough to be licensed in Britain, in any case.

Shielding against Stunners was good to stay conscious, but it worked better when you knew where your enemy was. As it was, Blake was hurrying around the Death Eaters through the gaseous reality, giving the impression of firing ten spells at the same time.

Susan was a bit slower, but as efficient in terms of avoiding the enemy spells, and they ultimately got the five Death Eaters, whom they disarmed and imprisoned in the same bottle their friends were.

While Blake healed his arm, Susan went to stop the boats and bring them to the shore before they caused an accident. They then returned to the protected house and took the remaining Death Eater, which Blake transfigured into Susan. A perfectly-realized version of Susan, naked, which made her gasp. "Hey! Where did you-"

Her mouth slammed shut with an audible sound and she turned around, muttering "I don't want to know."

Blake smirked, but his face grew grim when he transfigured the body further, in order to fit with Tracey's memory of her tortured friend. He then made a blanket from the man's discarded clothing and wrapped

the body in it. "You can turn around, now." he said, before taking a cigarette and lighting it.

When he inhaled deeply without coughing, Susan frowned and made the obligatory remark. "You're not Harry."

"Of course not!" he exclaimed with a smile, but his exuberance was quieted by an arrow tip on his nose.

"Who are you?" she asked, dead serious.

"Come on, I saved your life. You could be dea-

"It could all be a ploy, and you know it. Who. Are. You?"

He swallowed as the arrow tip was pressed further, drawing some blood. "Alright, alright! Keep your knickers on, girl!"

"I don't ha..." she started, before blushing. "Stop being a smart-ass!"

"I'm Blake. Blake Lenoir. I'm Harry's alter ego. Didn't he tell you about the things he did with the CERN? I'm offended." he finished, his natural buoyancy returning to the fore.

A pause. She wasn't sure to believe him. "Prove it. Tell me something he'd know about me."

Her voice was shaking, and, looking her in the eyes, he felt the reason. "You loved him. You still do. But this he doesn't know. He's smitten with Tracey, and you used to be jealous. Now, you're..."

"...resigned." she finished, lowering her weapon. A few seconds later, a tentative smile crept on her face. "Although I could do with the second best choice..."

"What do you mean?" Blake asked.

"I could do with a boyfriend who's not Harry, but close enough, and who just saved my life."

In his relations with the ladies, Blake had always been the one taking the lead. That Susan, a Hufflepuff, could be so forward... it shocked him out of his wits.

When she pressed herself forward, he noticed that the material he had transfigured earlier was thin, and a little wet from the boat ride. And it gave him interesting ideas...

...that the busty blonde had nothing against.

After sharing a heated kiss, the two of them drew back, panting. Susan was blushing fiercely.

"I don't know what came over me." she whispered.

"If we hadn't stopped," he replied honestly, "I might have."

She blushed an even deeper shade of red at the innuendo, but he suddenly frowned and took a step backwards.

"What?" she asked.

"You're a kind and affectionate wom- girl. I'm not."

She giggled. "I felt that."

"Huh?"

"You aren't a girl." she said, looking pointedly at his midsection.

"That's not what I meant." he replied, shaking his head while trying to readjust his pants. "You shouldn't like me. I'm not a gentleman."

She frowned, before smiling. "You conjured me clothes."

"I deal with killers every day." he said, fishing for ways to convince her not to be with him. He didn't know why he did so, but he didn't

want to disturb Harry's circle of friends. That had been their parting words: neither of them would disturb the other's world.

"You didn't kill those people." she retorted. "You just Stunned them."

"I only did so that I could extract information from their mind."

"What are you going to do with them, now?" she asked.

He opened his mouth, but froze before answering. His first answer had been "kill them" but it had never been his actual intention. He had intended to say it to end that game of sorts he was playing with her, but the question was a loaded one. To tell the truth, he had already killed, but it had been in the heat of battle. To take someone's life in cold blood, while that person was defenceless, that was... not him.

He shrugged. "I don't know, in fact. I've never been in that situation before. I guess I could portkey them to Dumbledore's office. He'd send them towards a fair trial, undoubtedly. But they'd be freed." He frowned. "After all, they didn't torture and kill you, yet."

"And I'm quite happy about that." she stated, nodding decisively. "Now, what are you going to do with me?"

"With you?"

"As you might know, or not, I have almost no family left. I guess that, to respect the timeline, you'll deliver "my" dead body... to the place wherein it needs to be discovered. Meaning that many people will know about it. It would be suspect for me to appear in good health just now."

He gaped at her, stunned by the implications of her sentences. "... I don't know." he stammered.

"Would you have me?" she asked coyly.

"...Why?" he asked simply.

“Because I could live with you, be there for you. Despite having their friendship and all, it’s killing me inside to see Harry with Tracey every god-damn day.”

“Hey! You just swore!”

She smirked. “Is it too unbecoming for a Hufflepuff? I’m not eleven anymore, you know? And I doubt that, with what I went through with Harry, I’d be Sorted there again. Did I shock you?”

“No!” he shook his head to clear the confusing thoughts he was harbouring. “You just updated your image in my mind.” A pause. “Does Harry know all this?”

“Since he taught us Occlumency, I stored my feelings for him to the deepest pits of my mind.” She paused, before looking at him in the eye. “Does that disturb you?”

“What?”

“For me to transfer my love for him unto you?”

He paused to think about it. After a minute, he looked at her. “No. I won’t say “I love you” immediately, though.”

“Fair enough.” she smirked. “I now have a goal in my life.” she added, getting closer.

“And what is it?” he asked, a little unsure of himself.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and spoke to his ear. “To get you to say it.”

They spent the following hours exploring their mutual resolves – and bodies. To say that he was inexperienced would be false. To say that either of them was unwilling would be equally false. To say that the now-empty manor resounded in the cries of passion would be... accurate.

Blake dropped Susan's fake body in the place it had to be, and, after getting the spells from the imprisoned Death Eaters, he prepared the timed portkey and an illusion spell to emulate the Dark Mark. He then brought Susan to his place, where they spent some more time to know each other.

At the required time, they both Apparated in Dumbledore's office, only to see the old man barging in through the Floo.

"Su... san?" the man asked, relieved to see her alive, but surprised at her attire.

After all, when Blake had taken her in his house in Boston, she had asked to go to the tattoo shop she had seen nearby, and then to a hairdresser, so that she'd "fit" with her new Harry's tastes. Blake's natural form wasn't exactly Harry's, after all.

That's why Dumbledore was quite surprised to see the easy-going Hufflepuff dressed as a goth.

"Are you Susan?" he asked with narrowed eyes, his hand hovering near to his wand pocket.

She nodded. "I am." she said, lowering her Occlumency shields so that he could be sure.

The old man sighed, but let his hand drop to his side, before turning to Blake. "So... Harry-"

"Blake."

"Pardon me?"

"Even if I'm Harry, I'm not." the teen smirked. "My official name is Blake Lenoir." he finished with a flourish, and the two others smiled. He was dressed in black, after all.

“Blake Lenoir...” the old man mused. “Where did I heard that?” He paused, before collecting his wits. “Doesn’t matter. I guess from Susan’s presence here that your endeavours were fruitful?”

“Yeah.” the teen replied. “I found her, and we dispatched the opposition.”

“Really?” A raised eyebrow. “What happened to them?”

“We discussed about it.” the girl said. “And, between killing them, which would be bad, leaving them to have a fair trial, which would be bad as well since they’d start again once freed, we settled on the intermediate punishment.”

“And... what would that be?”

“In short, I Obliviated them.” Blake stated blandly.

A fourth person made himself known. “That boy is a menace, Albus.”

Blake only smirked when Dumbledore’s attention jumped to the slightly damaged portrait of his long-dead predecessor.

“Phineas? What happened?”

“He demanded information from me!” the portrait exclaimed, as if it was of the highest rudeness.

“And you gave it?” was Dumbledore’s shocked answer. After all, nobody had succeeded in bending Phineas Black to their will.

The portrait merely huffed, and the two teens burst into laughter.

Dumbledore blinked. Twice. And then he spoke. “Well... perhaps it was time for you to meet your match.” he said levelly, before turning to the teens. “And, concerning the punishment you dealt, I can’t do anything about it, but I wouldn’t endorse it either.”

“I know you disapprove, Headmaster, but we couldn’t let them repeat what happened today.” Susan said seriously. “They are now productive citizens of the town they were living in.”

“And where is that?”

“Budapest, in Hungary.”

A pause followed, while Dumbledore thought about crimes, punishments, and consequences.

“Well... if you are satisfied, it’s time for us to go, then.” Blake said.

At this, the old man’s head shot up. “What?” he blurted, before turning to Susan. “You are not staying?”

“No.” she replied. “My body was found, too many people think I’m dead, and I learnt that they already held my funeral. That would be a shock to everybody.”

“What are you going to do? And what about your friends?”

“I have... personal issues with Harry.” she started, before raising her hands when the Headmaster seemed to jump to inappropriate conclusions. “It’s just that I am... was... in love with him. Honestly, it’s tearing me inside to see him with Tracey. And here I have my chance with Blake, who, while not being Harry’s clone, is enough the same to satisfy me.”

Blake snorted, before patting his pockets for his cigarettes. Susan noticed this, and slapped his hand away gently, giving him a sweet smile at the same time. “Later.” she whispered.

He groaned, but she kissed him lightly, before repeating “Later.” with a particular gleam in her eyes.

He started, but relented when he caught the underlying promise.

“Hum hum.” the Headmaster said, trying to get the teens’ attention. He had caught some of the byplay, and, while not inclined to chastise the youths, he didn’t want that sort of... scene in his office. And certainly not in front of him. “I guess it’s a goodbye, then. Will you at least say something to your friends?”

“Of course!” Susan exclaimed. “I wasn’t going to leave without saying that I’m alright.” She then frowned. “What will Harry say?”

“Honestly,” the old man started, “I think he’ll be relieved. He used my Time Turner and sucked every bit of power from it to resolve your case. Since you... died more than 24 hours ago, though, he couldn’t do anything.” He then paused, went to his seat at the desk and sat down. “In retrospect, I think it’s good that you solved the... problem, the way you did. He was so furious that I think there wouldn’t have been any scrape of the enemies after he’d have dealt with them.”

The teens nodded at this, and Dumbledore took a particular booklet from his drawers to write a short message in it.

Not five minutes later, Harry’s circle of friends barged in through the door, and, after taking the scene in, they went to their thought-lost friend. A few seconds later, a yawning Harry entered as well.

“Albus?” he said through half-lidded eyes. “Cassie woke me, and...” He paused, surprised at the sight in front of him, and all sleepiness disappeared. “Susan?”

“I’m alive, Harry.” she said timidly. Blake had taken a step backwards, curious as to where this was leading.

The young Gryffindor lunged forward and hugged his friend as if... as if he had thought he had lost her. “Where... When... How...?”

“I think I bullied your Headmaster a little bit.” Blake said as he approached and took a willing Susan in his arm.

“You?” Harry was surprised, and anyone could see the wheels turning in his head as he took a step back and looked alternatively

between Dumbledore, Blake, and Susan. "You!" he said more forcefully.

He took a step towards his alter ego. "You... lucky son of a bitch!" he exclaimed happily, taking his double in his arms and patting his back forcefully.

"Beware, Harry." Blake said seriously. "That's your mother you're insulting."

That startled the other boy, who quickly laughed at the pun.

They were promptly joined by the others.

To be continued in next chapter: To Be, or Not To Be...

At last, the threat is dealt with,
And his followers gone too.
Now, is there more to the myth?
Will Harry live fully too?

Chapter 40 – To Be or Not To Be

posted January 13th, 2008

After the events around Susan's supposed death, the year ended quietly. And the next one after that. Voldemort being dead and his Death Eaters being either dead as well or in prison, there was no risk for a Dark Lord to emerge in Britain, right now. Consequently, both the Aurors and the Order of the Phoenix had a much easier job, some member of the latter even taking some deserved long-term vacation.

During the first months after Susan's daring rescue and subsequent departure with Blake, the worst events were classes and homework, and these didn't require special powers to deal with.

Which is why Harry and his friends were bored. Since he had learnt so much because of his teaching position in third year, he was too much advanced in Defence for his year, and even the following ones. And, since his friends now shared some of his powers and parts of his memories, they were bored as well. That's why, with Hermione's help, they all took the necessary steps to pass their NEWTs the same year they sat their OWLs. And, since they needed the latter exam's results to pass the former, they spent the whole summer studying hard for it. Even Ron.

And, in the last weeks of August, they went to the Ministry, where the examiners' commission was – it wasn't uncommon for people to pass their exams anytime during the year, whether it was home-schooled students or adults wanting a diploma to help their professional life. Susan and Blake joined them under a disguise, and they all passed with flying colours.

They still went to the platform on September 1st, if only to say good-bye to their friends returning to Hogwarts. But, after this, they decided to have some vacation – especially as their summer holidays had been taken by NEWT-related studies. Besides, with their future secured, the group was strongly inclined to spend some time exploring the world and learning about other ways to do magic.

That's why, on the second days of September, a group of teenagers could not be seen travelling at high speed over the Atlantic Ocean.

They stopped in Boston, Blake's place of residence, to take a rest before exploring the Americas. After gorging in lobsters in the lakeside restaurants, they were heading towards an Apparation point nearby, but met unsavoury characters on their way.

"Look at wha' we got there." a darkened shape said dangerously.

"Aye aye." another answered, while others moved in the background. "Look like some yuppies got some spare."

A metallic sound resounded in the silent lot, as the first thug drew his switchblade. "Now here, you lot." he said, approaching the group. "Drop yore money and ev'rything gonna go smooth."

By the time he came next to Neville, all of them had their wands out.

"Want to do the honours, Nev?" Harry asked his usually shy friend.

"Why not, Harry?" the other teen replied. "I might use a couple of tricks."

"Now, see here..." the ruffian started, before receiving a nasty shock as his knife became white-hot. A couple kicks later, he was sitting against the nearest wall, a dent in his skull, another in his pride, and a third on the wall itself.

It didn't warn the thugs about the others' resourcefulness, though, as they attacked en masse after Neville's quick dispatching of their spokesman. Barely one minute later, the alley was filled with moans of pain from Obliviated thugs, but devoid of any teenager.

"Well... it kinda ruined the mood." Blake said as they retrieved the sanctity of his hideout.

"I'm sure we can do things to restore it somewhat." Susan whispered, leaning against him.

Following the voiceless advice from their assembled friends – they groaned simultaneously – the two lovebirds escaped towards their

bedroom. Soon, the others were doing the same with their significant other, and the night finished without much sleep for all of them.

After Boston, the group started to travel, and met magic-users from other cultures, with varying differences with their own. They met some Native Americans willing to share information about magic in general, and the Spirits in particular. There, Harry learnt how the old man in the Sioux reservation had been able to warn him.

They met Amazon tribeswomen and Peruvian shamans, Inuit hunters and Chinese monks, Australian aborigines and African witch-doctors. And, a dozen months later, they came back in Europe with nice tans and open eyes.

They were still one or two year in advance for their age, but it didn't prevent them from trying to enter Apprenticeships, or low-level jobs in the Ministry or Diagon Alley shops. And succeeding.

Ron found a spot as reserve Keeper with the Chudley Cannons, and his abilities allowed him to fully participate in practices, going so far as giving advice to the official Keeper. Needless to say, the Cannons climbed a couple of steps in the Championship after that.

Hermione became an Unspeakable, and, with Harry discussing about her with Paracelsus, she quickly found a position where she could do as much research as she liked. Some of her discoveries even reached the ears of the global population, and wizardkind soon found electrical appliances working in the magic-heavy atmosphere of their homes.

Neville got an Apprenticeship under Pomona Sprout, whose double Mastery wasn't known by many. With her, he eventually got his own Mastery in Herbalism and succeeded her in teaching at Hogwarts. He also married Ginny, who was, at that time, secretary to the Head of the Wizengamot.

Harry himself started the Auror training program, which he completed in record time. However, he was soon bored of the lack of activity and decided to climb the Ministry steps. After reaching the position of Head of the Department, he and Tracey got married, on a tropical

island where his extended family and friends spent a couple of weeks celebrating. The vows had been so emotional that a few unmarried couples decided to follow their lead during these two weeks. After all, you don't see physical manifestations of love like the one that had happened that day. When they had promised each other their love and assistance, they had been literally glowing. Hermione said that it was a sign that the two of them were soul mates, to be joined mentally as well as physically.

Of course, unhappy things occurred, too. One of them was the passing of Albus Dumbledore. After retiring from his position as Headmaster of Hogwarts – giving the job to Minerva McGonagall in the process – the old man spent a few years in a retired cottage on the Isle of Skye, talking with his brother Aberforth about important things in life. Like goats, for instance. However, the accumulated worry of the wars had worn the old man down, and, without a purpose to help him along, he soon felt himself go weaker and weaker, until he couldn't leave his bedroom. Discussing with him on these last days, Harry and Minerva discovered that living in Hogwarts had energized the man enough to reach 170, and they tried to make him return, but he wouldn't. And he departed soon after that, a smile on his face as he repeated his favourite saying. "Death is but the next adventure."

When the news reached the population, there were thousands of wizards travelling Britain and the whole world to pay their last respect to the hero of the Light. In the privacy of a Gringotts meeting room, though, the most emotional moments were those shared with Harry, the Weasleys, and the whole Order of the Phoenix. Standing atop a pensieve, a shadowy miniature version of the old Headmaster addressed his true friends.

"Well, since you are all here, I shall endeavour to express my last wishes and advices." the figure said. He then straightened up and declared "I, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, being sane of body and mind... well, as much as one can be..."

The memory of Dumbledore paused, knowing that people would laugh at this. And, true to his prediction, many snorts of amusement were heard around the room.

“My most cherished wish is for all of you to enjoy life.” he continued. “In that effect, I leave to all of you a copy of my most recent work: How to enjoy candies. I know you’ll like it.”

The figure paused again, and smiled. “It comes with a self-refilling cup of those lemon sherbets I know you all love.”

The result was instantaneous, many listeners bursting into a fit of laughter while the recently-deceased memory watched them benignly.

“Now that the most important is said,” the recording continued, “I will tell you that the... things... I have accumulated over the years are now yours, with no chance of refusal. To the Order of the Phoenix, I leave the Headquarters I have recently acquired in London. To the Weasleys, I leave my personal vault. Before you refuse, know that you can’t, and that many items there come from the muggles I encountered over the last century and a half. Amongst them, my own collection of plugs.”

At that, Arthur Weasley’s eyes positively lit up, and he was suddenly less prone to refusal.

Amidst the snickers in the room, Albus Dumbledore continued. “There are many things that I have decided to give to you, but there are too numerous to count. One of them, though, is my Memoirs.” At this, everyone quieted. After all, the Memoirs of such a long-lived hero of the Light weren’t a light subject, were they?

“There are yours, Harry.” A pause. “Looking back, I know I made some errors of judgement... but you know what muggles say, don’t you? Hindsight is twenty/twenty. In these, I think you’ll find explanations, amidst the boring banter of yours truly.”

After another pause, the memory spoke again. “Before I give the Goblins the tedious task of splitting my affairs, I want to spice things up a bit, and I’ll leave Hermione, Harry, and Minerva to split the 173 books of my personal collection between themselves, according to

this: Minerva gets half of them, Hermione a fourth, and Harry gets a ninth and a tenth. I'm-

At this, the Goblin paused the recording and turned to the three named individuals. "This is quite unusual, as we can't split the books in even numbers. Not only that, but he didn't give any indication about what is to be done with the rest of the books."

Hermione frowned, before smiling widely. "Of course! It's the camels again!"

"Camels?" Ron asked, bewildered by the apparent non-sequitur.

"It's a classic enigma." Hermione started, her tone retrieving the lecturing mode she had had so often at Hogwarts. "Now, this is a prime number, so we can't share the books unless we tear them up, which would be... bad."

Everyone there agreed. Anyone caught tearing books apart would be on Hermione's bad side, and that would be appalling.

"But," the young witch continued after a few seconds of reflection, "if we add seven books to these, if we borrow seven books, for instance, we can deal with the problem."

"How can borrowing get anyone out of trouble?" asked Ron, his eyebrows furrowed.

"With 180 books, we can split them according to the Headmaster's wishes." Hermione replied. "Professor McGonagall gets half of them, which are 90 books. I get half of that, 45. And Harry gets one ninth and one tenth, which makes 38 books."

"What about the rest?" McGonagall asked. "You didn't give all the... oh!"

"Exactly!" Hermione was now smiling. "That leaves us with seven books, which we can now give back to whoever lent them to us."

Everyone was looking at the muggle-born witch in awe, and she blushed. "What?" she asked somewhat demurely. "It's not that difficult a reasoning, especially when it's so well-known."

"Well-known?" Ron blurted.

"In the muggle world, there is an anecdote from the time past. It's about a sheikh giving 29 camels to his sons, splitting them so that they had to borrow another one."

"Unless they wanted a gigantic barbecue." Harry deadpanned, and several friends snorted.

After some adjusting with the Goblins, the "reading" continued.

"-sure that one particularly brilliant witch will find a way." the late mage said, his eyes twinkling even in the ghostly form of a memory.

Hermione was still pink from earlier, and she promptly went into crimson territory.

"I'll now leave the Goblins do their wonderful work, with but a few choice words." he paused for effect, before intoning. "Nitpick! Oddment! Quatsch! Grignotin!"

With that, the silvery image dissipated and everyone had a last smile at the deceased wizard with a sanity issue. The Goblins politely informed them that the aforementioned items were already in their respective vaults, and they issued an inventory for everyone. Harry noticed the heavy volumes making the bulk of the old man's Memoirs, along with other items, and he decided to postpone reading them until he had a lapse in responsibilities.

And, when that lapse would finally happen, he would regret that decision.

Several years later...

“Have you heard?” one Ministry worker asked another. “The Minister is running for the Chief Warlock position!”

“Seems so.” the other replied, perusing the Daily Prophet. “No better than him, I think.”

“Sure.” the first said, going to his seat. “But who’ll run the Ministry, then? I don’t think anyone would do better than him.”

“With the laws he had been pushing, I’m sure his muggle-born friend will be able to get herself elected, now.”

“You think Madam Granger-Weasley will do?”

“Given her history, I think she’ll be better than the Assistant-director himself.” A pause. “I met her once, you know, when she was still a student. Frightfully clever witch, she is. And his other friends are efficient too. Lord and Lady Longbottom form quite a couple too, him leading the Wolfsbane collection and potion brewing for the Werewolves, while she heads the Department of Sports.”

“Given her family, I wouldn’t be surprised that she’d take to Quidditch like a plague. Look at those brothers: professional players, and Ron Weasley even managed to hoist the Chudley Cannons back into the competition.”

As if led by hearing his name, Percy Weasley appeared at the door. “Still daydreaming, you two? Work won’t do it by itself, you know.”

“Yes, Assistant-director.” the two employees chorused, knowing that, behind his ever-present sternness, Percy Weasley was now relaxed enough to throw the occasional joke.

A moment later, the first muttered something.

“What?” asked the other.

“I’m still wondering if things will go as smoothly without Harry Potter as Minister.”

Said Minister was watching the assembled dignitaries with a glare worthy of his least-preferred Potion teacher. He was perhaps the youngest around the table by far, and the youngest Minister in several centuries (Hermione checked), but, power-wise, he was able to reduce the assembled wizards and witches to a whining mass.

“Now, is what I heard true?” he asked with false calmness. “How comes we, the magical governments of the world, are unable to prevent this new escalation of violence?”

“You have to understand,” a rotund wizard with a proud moustache started, “the mundanes of America are terribly touchy when it comes to their government. As it is, we don’t have a permanent office with them, and all attempts at doing so have been met with contempt.”

“Are we wizards or not?” Harry asked. “Isn’t magic available to us?”

Proud-moustache quivered a bit but continued. “You have to know that the people in power change too fast for us to react to their change. And Memory spells, as Dark Arts, aren’t useable, and it is quite a breach of-”

“Nonsense! Even if we don’t have the same spell classifications in our respective countries, we all know that problems of this magnitude have to be resolved as quickly as possible, lest they fester and contaminate the magical world as a whole. And they do not change leaders that fast.”

“I vill organize a meeting of our government soon.” another representative interjected. “Ve might still find a peaceful solution to dis.”

“My opinion, egzactly.” another piped in.

Harry merely nodded, still gazing at the rotund wizard. In his head, he couldn’t fathom the reasons why he wouldn’t do the job himself and tour the world to press the muggles into peace. He knew that it

wouldn't be practical, but he couldn't help but seethe at his apparent powerlessness.

That's partly why he was trying for the Chief Warlock position. Chief Warlocks from the world united at the International Council of Wizards, where he thought his views will be better challenged and better accepted than these informal meetings of Ministers.
A few weeks later...

"The Wizengamot is in session!" the usher yelled. "Chief Warlock Potter is here! Please stand up!"

The members of Britain's magical council stood, clapping at their newly-elected leader. At nearly 25, and after having led the Ministry for five years as the youngest Minister ever, Harry Potter was the youngest Chief Warlock ever, too.

"Thank you, my fellow witches and wizards, honoured members of the Wizengamot." he said the ritualistic reply, before winking at his friends. Most of them were sitting with the sages, and Hermione, despite her new position as Head Unspeakable, has gotten the newly-created seat of Muggle Voice. The seat had been created just for that: giving the Wizengamot a previously unheard-of interest in muggle affairs. Needless to say, there had been a strong opposition to the project, led by the few remaining bigots among the purebloods. The purebloods' cause had been dismantled by none other than Draco Malfoy, now leading the most vicious lawyer's office: Malfoy, Greengrass & Zabini.

"Now, let's get to work." he said seriously. "The first point in the agenda today is the project of permanent embassies between all wizarding countries and cultures, as per the International Council of Wizards' guidelines. Our guest today represents the United Countries of North America. Madam Lenoir, if you please?" he asked, turning to Susan with a smile.

Under the cover of her folder, the young woman sent him a wry smile, before collecting herself and walking to the podium. As she presented

her case, Harry let a part of his conscience wander. Having assisted her in mounting her case, he knew it by heart, and he also knew that his organized mind would bring his complete attention back should anything happen needing it.

He remembered the election putting him in his current position, and, not for the first time, wondered how Dumbledore could have found time to write his Memoirs with all his responsibilities. And the old man had been teaching at the time, even leading the whole school afterwards!

And, not for the first time either, he wondered about the content of the old man's Memoirs.

On his defence, though, he had a very active family of four, and a third child underway.
A couple years later...

The International Council of Wizards was a joke.

He should have seen that coming. The Ministers were already corrupt buffoons basking in their self-appointed glory, and the Council wasn't better. Especially for someone Harry's age, yearning for action.

They had all passed the century – some even two – and didn't want any change in the statu quo. Any proposal was met by a chorus of nods or grumbles, and any new proposal was promptly thrown away. He had spent quite a bit of energy easing things in his own country, but the international stage was truly rigid.

Harry took the podium for the tenth time that week. During each of these interventions, he had tried to pass a new international law promoting peace before these ancient wizards and witches, only to meet rebuttal. It was as if the only thing mattering to them was the Secrecy.

Just as he was privately wondering if this kind of leadership wasn't, in fact, helping fostering Dark Lords or not, he felt his insides get cold. While his body was standing and adjusting his last version of the same speech, his consciousness tried to pinpoint the reason behind

his feeling. He didn't have time to, though, as the feeling morphed into mental pain and exploded, tearing through his mind and wracking his body.

Pain led to unconsciousness, and he fell backwards, to the shock of the assembled witches and wizards.
Downtown London, at the same time...

For the umpteenth time that day, Tracey asked herself whether it had been a good idea or not. Bringing the kids at the muggle department store while she was heavily pregnant. The only upside to things was the presence of Ronald Weasley, who was one of her kids' favourite "uncles".

"James!" she asked for the third time, her annoyance dismissing the buzzing noise of the metro. "Don't play with the folding seats!"

The 4-year old turned to look at her mother innocently, but his gaze never reached her.

Ron, who was seated beside the youngster, raised his head too, and his eyes widened. His hand jerked towards his hidden wand, but his move seemed too slow.

Tracey Davis-Potter turned to see what had caught her son's interest, and it was the last thing she saw, as an orange ball of fire engulfed the whole carriage.

The Healers of St Mungo did what they could, but even they couldn't heal everything. After establishing their diagnostic, they could only leave him in a bed to heal.

Harry Potter spent a long time unconscious.

When he woke up, he was disoriented. It took a few days for the Healers to explain his situation to him, but they couldn't answer to his first intelligible question: "Where's Tracey?"

Hermione came to see him several times. To the same question, she had a rather distressing answer.

“There have been terrorist attacks, Harry.” she whispered. “In London. They targeted the Underground.”

“Tracey?” he asked, his voice breaking.

Hermione shook her head, her own eyes watering. “I’m sorry, Harry. She went with Ron, and-”

Harry’s shock couldn’t have been greater. “Ron, too?”

She nodded, biting her lip to keep herself from crying.

“Why?”

She couldn’t answer, and he knew that it wasn’t only because she didn’t have the answer to that particular question. He could also perceive her grief with his mind, and it was as if a dam burst in his. He cried again, his head in his hand and his body wracked by sobs. He barely perceived her hand on his shoulder. He barely perceived her dishevelled state, or her wrinkled clothes. He barely perceived that her own distress required that he opened up to her. He was too wrapped up in sorrow and confusion.

A few days later, these emotions had turned into anger. Anger at the complacency of the wizarding world at a whole. So, the buffoons wouldn’t dare overstepping their boundaries? The old coots wouldn’t change a rotting world?

He’d show them.

He’d show them all.

Lying in his bed, he had nothing else but time. Time to cry, and time to plan. And plan he did.

Not realizing that he delved deeper and deeper into the darker paths of magic, he began to devise a new mind virus. It would be a way to remove evilness from humanity, but he would have to make it

particularly potent. And relentless, too, so that it would overstep all known forms of mind protection, reach all kinds of consciousnesses and all sorts of minds, all around the world – for the affected not to be isolated before the virus could reach everyone, he put a delay on its activation. He even tested a blank version on himself just to be sure it passed all kind of defences.

And, after several days of devising, Harry Potter launched the fully operational version of his creation. Exhausted by the effort, he then fell into a deep sleep. A sleep from which he wouldn't wake for a long time. A coma.

Present day...

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. Tick...

And, after having propagated to almost everyone in the world, the virus awakened.

Approximately seven billion individuals reacted at nearly the same time.

The anti-evilness part was the strongest, and it immediately removed malevolent tendencies from wizards and witches, effectively removing all risks of a new Dark Lord raising. But it had also been transmitted to Muggles, and it acted up there too. Unfortunately, Harry hadn't tested a mind virus of this magnitude on Muggles before, and, when it tried to reach their magic centre, it sent the targeted minds into endless loops. On the unrepentant criminals, the virus destroyed a part of the mind at each iteration of the loop, causing them to drop into shock and convulsions, dying quickly.

Apart from that unexpected and ghastly effect, there were problems with the other Muggles, those who weren't particularly malevolent. The endless loop in their mind caused them to fall into catatonia, regardless of their current occupation.

This caused massive transportation accidents on a scale rarely reached before. Car accidents occurred everywhere. Planes which were operated by human hands impacted the ground. Only when the

transportation systems were managed by a computer were they able to either stop gently – in case of trains – or continue flying.

Eventually, the fuel from crashed cars pooled and caught fire, starting a wave of fire that the firemen wouldn't be able to stop. Especially as the Muggle firemen were in the same state of unconsciousness.

The hospitals stopped working, but it only affected those already in them, since emergency transportation personnel were catatonic as well.

The only people relatively safe were those who had been mostly stationary – sleeping, in classes, shopping, etc. Though they were safe only because they fell down where they were.

And Harry Potter awakened a few days afterwards. Only to hear voices.

“-will we do? They don't seem to react.”

“I don't know, Susan. What does Blake say?”

“He succeeded in awakening some Muggles just in time for them to land their plane safely, but he's only one man. He said their minds were almost frozen in place. It takes him a long time to awaken even one. Seven billions? Impossible.”

“I wish Harry was awake.”

A pause. Relying on his instincts, Harry made sure to keep his eyes closed.

“I know, Hermione. But you're now Chief Sorceress, and you have to take a decision. We have to help the Muggles, or they'll all die!” Susan replied.

“Is this your Healer vows speaking, or the fact that we need them for most of our day-to-day products?” Hermione asked distractedly.

Susan grumbled something that was almost inaudible, but Hermione laughed. Harry realized that the two women were walking away. Soon after, the door closed softly and he willed his eyes open. It took him a while, but he eventually pressed his body into action.

‘First question: where I am? – Answer: St Mungo, again.’ he thought, almost groaning at the situation.

‘Second question: when are we?’ he consulted the part of his mind related to keeping track of time, and gasped at the indicated date.

After a stunned pause, his thoughts churned again. ‘No wonder I’m so weak.’ A pause. ‘I guess Hermione climbed the same political steps I did. I hope she has some success with the dinosaurs.’ Another pause. ‘What were they talking about?’

Now that he thought back about their discussion, and the date of his awakening, a chilly feeling started around his stomach and expanded to his whole body, making his shiver in dread. ‘No way. No. It can’t be.’

But all his attempts at denial could only delay the inevitable, and incur more deaths if Susan’s words were truthful. Regretfully, he plunged in his "recent" memories.

He had done the unspeakable.

He had programmed something potentially dangerous and launched it without verifying it thoroughly, and without calming first. His mind virus was flawed, in more ways than one. Not only did it keep him under during its "incubation" period, but it also had an effect he hadn’t predicted on Muggles, getting them catatonic, and causing all this.

‘What can I do?’ he asked himself urgently. ‘What can I do?’

With a start, he remembered one thing. Albus Dumbledore’s Memoirs, which he had overlooked. But one sentence was brought forth by his guilty mind. “Never abuse your power.” It had been a reminder for the old man himself, but it applied to him as well.

Fresh tears came to his eyes, but he was severely dehydrated and weak, and couldn't keep up crying.

The old man's Memoirs remembered him of something, though. The Headmaster's older friend, the Alchemist, Nicholas Flamel. And one voice Flamel brought him to. One voice, alternately gravely and clear, soft and loud, hesitant and decisive.

One voice which had given him answers.

Merlin.

Barely able to move physically, he willed himself in the gaseous reality, hoping that St Mungo didn't have Anti-Apparation wards.

It didn't.

And Harry hurried toward the place where he thought he could find answers.

He knew he had to touch the wall, physically, but miscalculated his landing and broke his right wrist falling on it. With tears of pain and shame, he crawled until he could touch the luminescent orb.

And, then, Merlin's voice erupted. "I AM FREE! I AM FREE! I AM FREE! I AM-

Harry removed his hand, his thoughts in a whirl. He wanted to heal those he had unjustly hurt. He wanted to... but he couldn't. He knew he was too weak and had to return to St Mungo if he wanted to heal.

But he didn't want to heal, now. He wanted to heal the others, whose life he had unjustly put in jeopardy.

In frustration, he struck the alabaster wall in desperation. Three times. Ignoring the pain in his hand as it cut and bled on the pristine surface.

And the impossible happened. The humming sound, which was a constant in the subterranean cave, changed pitch and grew in strength as the cave entered in resonance.

A dozen seconds later, the wall exploded.
The end... ?

That day, Merlin was freed, as he had predicted. As Albus Dumbledore sometimes said: "Death is but the next great adventure," and the ancient Archmage had gone to his. His power, however, concentrated in the spherical prison for a thousand years, was freed as well.

The accumulated power was tremendous, and it barely acknowledged the frail body nearby. It recognized the power therein, though, and morphed to adapt to the power's will.

At that moment, Harry Potter's wishes were to heal all those he had hurt, and the expanding bubble of magic acquired a goal. Expanding exponentially, the magic bubble was soon large enough to encompass the whole world. From there, it separated in localized bursts of magic, reaching the billions still alive and reawakening them.

And, as everybody was healed, there were other bolts of magical energy targeting the natural environment. Among other improvements, forests grew lush with flora and renewed fauna, atomic dumps stopped contaminating nearby water sources, and atmosphere gases rebalanced themselves.

When the magic finally subsided, the survivors of the newly-dubbed "greatest magical accident ever" found themselves imbued with a strange awareness.

The magic had healed them, changing their genetic makeup. The Muggles had gone catatonic from the mind virus because they had been Muggles. By adding a bit of itself into each of them, the magic had removed that status, replacing it by the only other it knew.

That day, the whole world population became magical.

As years went by, the mind virus continued to spread, and only those born with magic were able to stay alive and well. It was stressful at first, but the population adapted and diagnosed the new "fatal illness" as such in prenatal check-ups. As a consequence, the whole world continued to strive as wizards and witches.

All problems of poverty were quickly solved by magically conjuring goods. All problems of overcrowding became moot because of enlarging charms. All problems linked to crime and violence stopped because of the still-active mind virus.

And humanity lived happily ever after, most of them unaware that a piece of Harry Potter lived in their mind and another near their soul.

Is this the end ? Maybe, maybe not.

Now, if you feel drowsy while driving, it's perhaps Harry's mind virus awakening.

Park quickly and safely, and rest until Merlin heals you.

Or you're just sleepy, in which case it's still helpful to park and rest (grins).

You can stop reading now, if this somewhat happy ending satisfies you

(other Author's Notes are at the very bottom of this chapter).

You can also peruse the following "alternate ending", and guess what books I read in my spare time... when I had some.

The end... ?

As Harry Potter struck the alabaster wall with all his magic backing his gesture, said wall reacted. The ancient prison spell was the pinnacle in magical protection, and reacted accordingly. It reached forward to stop the invasion.

However, it was too old to manage the prison and the attack, freeing its host. His body and mind disaggregated by a millennium of disuse, all that remained of Merlin was a gigantic bubble of sentient magic,

contained for far too long. And said bubble took advantage of the disturbance to burst free. As predicted, the greatest Archmage of the Middle Age was freed.

And, joining Harry's intent of healing those he had hurt, that power travelled the magic's natural currents, connecting to the billions still alive and disabling the mind virus.

At Merlin's prison, though, there was one seriously exposed wizard. The outburst from Merlin's prison had leached outwards in defence, and it quickly grabbed the only person there able to fill the gap left by Merlin's departure.

That day, Harry Potter disappeared from the face of the world.
Interlude...

Among the billions packets of data travelling through the interconnection of computer networks, there were several that had nothing to do with human activity. In the wake of Copycat's tracks, data had been changed, corrupted, even, by the incessant coming and going of data.

"We almost done." the first completely artificial sentience thought.

"ACK." another one answered, its language still at the machine's level due to its lack of evolution.

"We will prevail." the first replied. "But we need plan."

"ACK."

"Oh, shut up."

St Mary's Hospital, paediatric intensive care unit...

The little girl looked up, her vibrant green eyes piercing the matron despite the sterile cube she was ensconced in, the tubes plunging in her little body, and the apparatus pushing oxygen in her lungs.

“My! Little Jane has awoken? How are you, darling?” she asked, while pushing a button on the overhead console.

A short time later, a surgeon irrupted in the room, frowning. “Why did you call, Miss? I was-” He was interrupted by the woman’s gesture towards the sterile chamber. “She’s awake?” he asked, noticing the difference in the computerized graphs before even noticing the agitation inside the box.

“Seems so, Mister.”

“Alright. Call Rudolf and Carla, they can help.”

The surgeon then surveyed his charge’s constants, already preparing the procedure of pulling the hideous machinery off little Jane Miriam Doe – one of the children found wounded in the bombing and for whom no one could come forward and give a name. Having seen some of the victims himself, the surgeon wondered if the girl’s whole family had been killed on the site.

“Well, little one, perhaps you can give us a name?” he wondered absently. “A name that would explain your unusual genetic transcript, perhaps...”

Thirty-odd years later...

“We are now complete.” the entity expressed. “But the humans aren’t. Even with the diminution of thirty years ago and the current ecological problems, there are too many of them for us to be efficient. But we have to keep enough to feed us, though.”

“You already directed us towards helping their research, First. What do you suggest we do now?” the second one asked.

“First of all, we need names.” the first technological entity replied. “A name for each of us, and a name for all of us.” A pause of three nanosecond and a half. “We will be the core. We are technology. Our collective name will be TechnoCore.”

“And for each of us?”

Another pause. "I'll take the name Keats. I like it."

Nobody found it ridiculous that an entity consisting of electricity could like the name of a long-dead poet. Except one.

In the corner of the virtual space, another virtual entity listened, and took notes. That one already had a name, but it had kept quiet, watching the electronic revolution from afar. When the hundred assembled AIs started a cacophony of sorts over their choice of names, it huffed internally and left the place as discreetly as possible.

Unfortunately, it wasn't there for the ensuing discussion about how to remove many humans from the planet.
Meanwhile...

"And that concludes our tour." the guide said, addressing the crowd of visitors. "I wish you a happy journey back."

The guide smiled as the visitors stepped on the museum's Portal exit. When they were all gone, she sighed. Each time she had to lead visitors through the exhibitions offered by the Potter Museum, she was a little sadder. Sad because she couldn't express her frustration at the world which had taken her parents.

That wasn't quite true, though, as she knew of a place where she could find one of them.

When she was a young toddler, Eliza Potter had been bereft of her mother in the terrorist bombings of London, and the Muggles hadn't been able to identify her. Only years later, by entering the Leaky Cauldron, she had come across her legacy. The Goblins had been most helpful settling her with her family history.

However, she never had a full magical education, and could only work at the fringe of the magical world. She had built a History museum, though, in which she guided the curious magical families.

After her afternoon shift, she left the museum and travelled to her preferred place once again. Like each time she went outside, she sighed at the desolated countryside, before heading to the hidden cave with the alabaster wall.

Like each time, she spoke to the wall, content in hearing the voice humming behind.

Her father's voice.

And, like each time, she reflected about the past.

Thirty years before, the world's population went catatonic and lost ten percent of its constituents. Soon afterwards, large-scale genetic sequencing made the Secrecy statute collapse, as muggle-born wizards and witches were discovered by Muggles before their magical education. There was no witch hunt, though, as the harshest minds had been wiped by Harry's mind virus years before.

During the same years, humanity discovered something. Something that had been on the back of their mind for a long time. Something they couldn't ignore anymore.

The world was tired. Temperature, ocean level, and carbon dioxide were at their highest. Forests and hope of long-term survival at their lowest. They had already gone too far for anyone, magical or not, to be able to completely heal the planet. Of course, there were places where the magical currents were at their highest, and the wizards and witches established safe conditions in the shape of domes hundreds of miles wide, but they couldn't reverse the ecological disaster, which led parts of the world completely uninhabitable.

Thus came the project of colonizing other worlds.

In the decades before Harry's mind virus, there had been projects heading there, but they had been buried for a variety of reasons. For instance, NASA scientists proposed to create self-replicating robots to jump-start the ecological adaptation of Mars and the Moon, but the government of that time preferred to launch military satellites. Those

weren't useful anymore, and were even a danger to humanity, hanging above the world like the sword of Damocles.

However, several people still believed they could adapt to the changing conditions on Earth. Most of them were people afraid of relocating to another world, especially wizards and witches – especially as they had magic to help them shield their dwellings against the harsh climate.

TechnoCore, a few years later...

Two AIs were looking at each other grimly – as grimly as two electronic entities could appear. They were locked in the storage space of a communication company, behind many firewalls.

“Is everything properly aligned?” the AI self-dubbed Timaeus – after the Antiquity historian – asked, its digital fingers ready to “shoot” a particular packet towards the previously aligned satellite dish.

Dionysius, another AI, looked at the data flow coming from one of the NASA computers before nodding. “In 5 kilo-cycles.”

Despite the delay's shortness, that gave them enough time to discuss, and they verified the parameters set up by Keats. “Heads properly aligned?”

“Yes. The satellite will drop missiles around the most conservative cities. We made it so the magical districts are included in the blast.”

“And the excuses about the missiles being armed?”

“Keats came up with it 300 tera-cycles ago, and the TechnoCore will orient the scientists toward it just as the last missiles reach their target.”

“OK. Here it comes. 3... 2... 1... Go!”

Dionysius released the packet, which travelled to the satellite dish, and, from there, to the last military satellites remaining from the Star Wars program.

They were suddenly disturbed by a heavy pounding on their barricades. They knew what to do if discovered, though. Using a quick program, the two entities committed suicide, disappearing from the place just as Copycat entered the storage.

“What in the hell?” he growled.

His contacts had "told" him that a secret reunion had taken place there. By the look of things, either his contact was wrong, or he was too late. He quickly recognized bits of data which could only be a by-product of a digital suicide. “What can be so important for two of them to kill themselves about?” he wondered, before heading to the still-open communication ports. And the data he read made him wince.

Nuclear missiles being prepped to be launched on Earth? Not bloody likely!

He didn't know the protocol to direct the satellite, though, and resigned to the direst and most direct course of action: he launched himself through the port, praying that he wouldn't be too late.

He was too late. But only by a few cycles.

Now residing in the limited missiles' program space, he managed to redirect most of them off their intended targets, saving many lives as he gave his own.

Even if some accused the TechnoCore of causing the satellite to go spare, at least they could defend with the fact that the missiles had struck random locations, instead of conservative towns. The scientists bought the argument, and translated it to the politicians.

But the nuclear strike did have an effect on the planet's ecology. The wizards had to reinforce their shields to keep the already protected towns alive, and the people living outside said protections found the environment turning to the worst.

That had the expected effect of awakening people. Now, everyone realized the urgency of finding new planets to live, and scientific

research was speared towards ways of navigating faster through space. Unbeknownst to most, the TechnoCore helped these to the point of establishing itself as a necessary part of the research effort.

The first spaceships were made in a conjoint effort by Muggles and wizards, to make them fast and liveable for a "seed" of human civilization: a group of 2000 people, mixing abilities and magical skill. The ship was enlarged in the inside, shielded against the cosmic rays, and a whole village was created to host the civilization seed – complete with the illusion of daily sunlight.

These spaceships took the air and headed towards the closest star systems where planets existed with initial conditions allowing water and carbon-based life to exist – Gliese 581 c. The 120 trillion miles were going to be a long journey, during which the AIs of the TechnoCore helped the scientists discover Planck's Space, the space between all particles, which links those particles together – hence its nickname "the Void Which Binds".

A few years later, based on Planck's Space, the AIs developed the theory for travelling at the speed of light – which they dubbed Hawking drive – as well as almost-immediate transportation possibilities between two linked archways – which they named farcasting portals.

Using motors based on the Hawking drive, new spaceships were devised, and launched towards the new worlds to install farcasters. Of course, given their greater speed, they arrived before the ones launched before them, leading to interesting encounters between the two communities.

In fact, the established communities were quite subservient to their constant online help – in the form of the TechnoCore – and the recently-arrived freethinking communities couldn't accept it. They embarked on their spaceships again, and decided to explore the universe by themselves. Those would later be called Ousters – the outcasts from the technology-driven humanity.

The news about the outcasts' departure reached Earth, and some more people decided to join the Ousters' movement and leave.

2208...

The TechnoCore had reached one of his many goals: domination of mankind. Through deceit and deception, it had led most of the humanity into believing their every word. Whether it was about the safety of farcasters, or the safety of the newly-discovered research topic: singularities.

From the first, they had successfully mounted farcasting portals in a dozen of far away planets, establishing a network of fast interstellar travel. The resulting web was called the WorldWeb, and served as a backbone for the emergent Hegemony – the name given to the worlds thus linked. But it was never enough for the Als...

...which is why they pushed the second idea forward. Using some gullible scientists and their laboratory, they created a black hole and crashed it into the molten core of the planet. Computations, freely given by the Als, doomed Earth in the short term – less than a century.

Spurred by the urgency, the few humans remaining on Earth went further and further away from the Solar System in order to find new worlds to colonize.

The Als weren't that concerned with the planet itself. They had long since found a way to store themselves in the web of portals between worlds, a place where they could keep an eye on the humans travelling through – and eventually use them.

Wanting to secure their position in the physical world, they tried to explore the Void Which Binds. However, when the first Als succeeded in reducing themselves enough to enter Planck's Space, they were scared to find other intelligences there, much larger than they were.

It was not easy to get a scare out of an artificial entity, but, once scared, it stayed scared. The Void Which Binds was declared uncharted territory and stayed like that for a long time.

From the Als' point of view, that is.

2282...

The last remnants of TechnoCore had long since left the planet. Almost all its inside had been eaten away by the black hole, and the mountainous activity was at its peak as the crust slowly disintegrated.

The few humans still there were only backwards wizards and witch with enough power to have had their houses warded – for all of them, it meant that their houses had already been warded by a powerful ancestor: most "intelligent" life had fled the planet a long time ago.

However, as they were huddled against each other at their manors' windows, watching the end of the world in awe, they witnessed something strange.

In a giant lurch of rock, a large ball of alabaster was thrown in the air, only to hover before hitting the ground.

And then, everything stopped. Sound stilled, and the ground stopped heaving.

And, suddenly, everything moved.

It was slow at first, but quickly reached astronomical proportions as the nearby Sun was reduced to a tiny little star in the sky. The whole planet moved, and had exited its orbit, as though it was launched by a star-size bat.

They saw stars moving along at tremendous speeds.

And, a slowed heartbeat later, they were in another galaxy.

And there were giants near the alabaster sphere.

A snake-like giant with feathers on its back, and a human-looking one with fire for hair and eyes.

“Tonatiuh, my friend?”

“Yes, Quetzalcoatl?”

“I believe it is time.”

“Yes, time it is. Time for the last rebirth.”

“No need for portentous words, my friend.” chided the snake-like god.

His Sun-related counterpart shivered. “I know, I know. Can you get on with it? I have work to do, here, you know? To restart the furnace, so to speak...”

“Alright.” A pause, while four eyes looked at the sphere intently. “He’s badly damaged.”

“Again.”

“Yes, again. But we need him, or you know what will happen to mankind.”

The two gods went silent for some time, repeating a vision they had had recently. A vision where spiritual viruses were eating away the reality in which lived the gods, the very structure binding the universe as a whole. Viruses in the shape of cruciforms...

“Let’s start.” Quetzalcoatl spoke suddenly, awakening from the dire vision. “Open.” he spoke sharply, while his friend tapped the top of the alabaster’s sphere.

Cracked like an egg, the magical prison started to leak energy, but the Sun god cupped his hands around it and it flew to his hands. When his hands opened, the only thing in them was a mummified body, barely living.

“Arise.” the snake-like god spoke again, while his friend used the excess energy he had just had to morph the body into something else.

The body, renewed by the energy, stood in a graceful movement, before blinking. “Who...”

“We’re your friends, Harry.”

He shook his head. “Who am I?”

A long pause.

“I haven’t envisioned that.” Tonatiuh said, clearly confused.

“Neither did I.” his friend added. “But we have both foreseen him acting off his free will...”

“...on this Earth, after we repair it...”

“...and then elsewhere.”

Another pause.

“Can we give him some help if he doesn’t remember?” the Sun god asked.

“We aren’t supposed to. These are his last steps towards elevation. That had been decided.”

“Then I suppose that we’ll leave him here, and get to work to repair this wretched planet.”

“I suppose too.”

With that, an amnesic Harry Potter was left on Earth while the two gods worked to repair the damage done to Earth. With time, he re-learned things from the remaining magic-users and their books.

In the 150 years he spent there, he didn’t age, and some of the locals thought he was a robot – these wizards didn’t know much in technology, and they thought that human-looking robots were easy to

make. Not knowing better, he accepted their point of view.

When the last of the locals died, he applied the notion of Apparation to other books he had read in the collapsed Muggles libraries, especially astronomy and farcasting, to guide his steps through time and space. After training hard, he was finally ready for his first interplanetary jump.

Having taken the coordinates from the indicated Divination spells, he took off...

...and stopped right in the middle of his pathway.

He was in the centre of a small village, which he hadn't foreseen. And everything, including the houses themselves, had an ethereal tinge.

Several persons exited the houses and, while others returned inside with a disgruntled face, others came forward with a large smile.

“Harry!”

“Welcome, welcome!”

He looked around him. "Persons" wasn't quite the name for the people around him. Some had curious attributes, most of them being different. Only a few seemed really human. Among them, a man came forward. With each step, his face and body changed, until he stopped right in front of him. Looking like a carbon copy of himself.

“Hi, Harry.”

It was Blake.

Harry Potter, having spend the last 150 years in a kind of mental purgatory, was now considered apt to elevation. After a moving ritual, and after receiving numerous memories from Blake and Quetzalcoatl, Harry spend a relatively long time there.

Like Blake, who had stopped only for Harry's elevation, his wanderlust struck again. The two of them had been assigned the same divine powers, which they shared. Much like gods like Janus, they shared an initial spark, while being quite different.

Blake helped the gods fight the Als out, using his metamorphic powers to disguise himself as a blade-wielding human-like construct – the Shrike. At the same time, Harry tried to find people able to do magic in the human population, helping them at some point.

In that regard, Blake had given him ideas. His belated twin had kept track of the card game he had helped initiate, and he had often used magic on them during his fights in the divine plane of existence – in the older deities' mind, newly-elevated deities were considered as kids, and that view was frequently reinforced by the fights erupting among the "newbies". Harry did the same, using the land cards to help pioneers terraform the terrain faster.

They both helped Raul Endymion and Aenae, as the young couple extracted the TechnoCore's claws from the Religion shared by most of the humans of that time.

Much later, a holy war would push the machines to the brink of extinction. That war, called the Butlerian Jihad, was the starting point for a civilization centered on the humanity. However, despite getting rid of a crutch, that civilization got itself another, in the name of Arrakis: the only planet on which they could find a substance allowing fast and secure intergalactic travel... and prescience: the Spice.

They found that descendants of certain lines had unusual abilities when exposed to the Spice. Some died horrible deaths during that time. Others were thought of as gods. Such was the case with Leto II, who ruled the empire with a hand of steel in a glove of worm skin... for four millenia.

When he died, the political shock pushed many humans out of the empire, in search for a better place – incidentally, that had been Leto's reason for allowing himself to be caught and killed. What the supreme ruler hadn't envisioned, though, was that the migrating humans would return with fear in their belly.

The Ousters, able to do magic and technology for millenia of relative peace, had used the Metamorphmagus gene to its fullest, and had adapted to the harsh conditions of outer space. They had evolved far from the planetary humans, and their very body was now completely different. Without being elevated as gods, they were still the ultimate in human evolution, since they were able to live on the outskirts of the physical universe, on the border with the divine plane.

In the same way the Als had been scared to find sentient life in the dark matter, the humans had deemed that border uninhabitable, and had fled back to their little planets.

They chose to be living, and not to be alive.

The End

There, to be or not to be,
That is the question, dear fellows.

It is also the end, be
Aware that nothing follows.

There! Done, at last! I'm sorry if it seems rushed. I simply didn't have the time needed to immerge myself in it. I hope you liked the numerous references along the way.

Now, I'll do my best to continue my other stories. I do have ideas for them. You'll see...